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THE  
FAIR-HAIRED ALDA.

A *Novel*.

BY  
FLORENCE MARRYAT  
(MRS. FRANCIS LEAN).

IN THREE VOLUMES.  
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## THE FAIR-HAIRED ALDA.



### CHAPTER I.

“IT IS YOUR DUTY TO HELP HER TO SHAKE IT  
OFF.”

FOR some months after Alda de Beriot married Lord Sidney Carleton, she imagined, and so did her friends, that all the romance and excitement of her life was over. She settled down with her husband at Mabyn Fields as though she had never lived anywhere else, and occupied herself with her animals, and garden, and home duties to the



exclusion of every sort of gaiety and, apparently, of pleasure. The county families, who had heard many rumours of the beauty of Lady Sidney Carleton and the mysterious scandal attached to her first marriage, flocked to call upon her, filled to the brim with curiosity and expectation. But they were wofully disappointed by the results of their attempted sociability. The majority of them were informed that Lady Sidney was not at home, and the minority were received by a listless, delicate-looking girl, clad in plain grey, with no particular animation about her face or manner, who appeared, moreover, not to feel the least interest in them or their proceedings, and who looked relieved when they rose to say good-bye. The invitations they sent to the Carletons also were politely declined, whereupon the county families formed a magnificent clique against Alda, and set her down as "bad form."

Lord Sidney ought to have better known the duty he owed to the county, they main-

tained, than to marry a woman who seemed to have no idea of the obligations she incurred as the mistress of Mabyn Fields, nor the imperative necessity of returning the hospitalities her husband had enjoyed at their expense.

So the communication between Lady Sidney Carleton and the owners of the neighbouring estates was reduced thenceforward to a minimum, which began and ended in the exchange of formal bows as their carriages passed each other in the narrow country lanes, the general opinion being that Alda was either too stupid or too ignorant to take her part in society, and it was a waste of time to call upon her.

So the girl was permitted to live her dull, unexciting life in peace, and one day followed another at Mabyn Fields without a break to its monotony. But Mr. and Mrs. Capel cried out loudly against such proceedings, and were horrified when they discovered the terms to which their daughter had reduced her

intimacy with the surrounding families. They had never thought, when working so hard to induce her to become Lord Sidney's wife, that he would bury her in the country, where she could never make a sensation nor reflect any credit on her parents.

They had anticipated shining more brightly themselves in the world of fashion by the reflected glory of their child's wealth and beauty, and were as disappointed at the result of her second marriage as the county families. Mrs. Capel, who had not yet recovered the shock of a private wedding and no tour, quite anticipated that when the twelve months for which Alda had so absurdly—in her opinion—stipulated to wear half-mourning had expired, her daughter would burst upon society in all the brilliance of her position and take the *habitués* of the London season by storm. But the year elapsed, and still Alda wore a grey or black dress, and expressed her intention of spending the summer at her country house. Mrs. Capel, who, with her husband,

was staying at Mabyn Fields at the time, lost all patience with her.

“But what can it signify to you, dear mother?” said Alda, in answer to her fretful expostulation; “you have left off dancing yourself, and you know I never cared for it. Late hours and crowded rooms do not agree with me, so what should I gain by exchanging this pure air and lovely scenery for a house in Grosvenor Square or Park lane?”

“But you seem to have no notion of the duty you owe to society, my dear child. As Lady Sidney Carleton you are *bound* to appear in public, and let the world give your husband a little credit for his choice.”

“I am bound to make myself the gaping stock of a set of fools, in order that they may speculate how much I gave for my jewels and whether my dress came from Worth or Elise?” replied Alda, contemptuously. “Mother, we don’t see things in the same light. If my position is worth anything to me, it is on

account of its being so well assured that there is no necessity that I should act against my inclinations in order to maintain it. I wish you also could be content to see me happy in my own way."

"But your way is such an extraordinary way, my dear. The idea of people with thirty thousand a year burying themselves in a place like this from January to December! I am sure I never know what to say when my friends ask me what can possibly be the reason of such a resolve on your part. It makes people *talk*, and say such unpleasant things, and, considering all that has gone before, you know, you ought to be the very last person to court impertinent curiosity."

A faint flush passed over Alda's cheek as she answered—

"It is because the curiosity is so impertinent that I refuse to pander to it. Let them talk, mamma. Did you ever know them to do otherwise? If it were not of me, it would be of somebody else. And the fact

that Sidney approves of my actions ought to be a sufficient answer for you to meet the worst attack with."

"But what is Lord Sidney about, my dear, to allow you to seclude yourself in this way? He used to talk with such pride of introducing you into society before you were married."

"I suppose he has changed his mind. Anyway, he never urges the idea upon me. On the contrary, he seems to shrink from publicity himself. It is entirely by his desire that we have not accepted any of the invitations sent us by the county families."

"Well, I think he is totally wrong, my dear, and so does your papa. Indeed, Mr. Capel told me last night that he intends to speak to him about it. Fancy your not having been presented at Court this spring! Lady Neville said the other day that in all her life she had never heard of such a mistake."

"Excepting when she was excluded from

Court herself, I suppose," rejoined Lady Sidney; "but as I have no desire to attend the Court balls, mamma, what use would it be to me to go to the trouble of being presented? I'm not as anxious to rush into the presence of royalty as if I were a *parvenue*. I leave that distinction to the wives of newly fledged knights and the hangers-on to the skirts of the Upper Ten. It is the specialty of snobbism."

"Alda, you are the most incomprehensible creature I ever met with. You are but one-and-twenty, and you talk as if your life were over instead of just begun."

"My life *is* over," said Alda, in a low voice, as she buried her face in the neck of a tawny sleuth-hound that was gazing up into her eyes as if it understood every word she said.

"You seem to care for nothing but those nasty animals," continued Mrs. Capel, complainingly. "One would really think you had no natural feeling. You will excite a

great deal of remark, my dear, if you cannot make an effort to arouse yourself a little. People will be sure to say you are still fretting over that old affair, which will not sound very flattering either to Lord Sidney or yourself."

"What would you have me do?" said the girl, wearily, as she lifted her pale face to confront her mother.

The year that had passed since her second marriage had not made much improvement in her appearance. She still looked white and thin, and her burnished golden hair seemed to have lost its lustre and been thinned of its luxuriance. She was attired as plainly as if she had been a mere country girl instead of the wife of a rich man, and not an ornament relieved the subdued tint of her dress. Inward fretting and, perhaps, reproach, had washed all the sparkle out of her eyes and face, so that she looked like a faded picture of what she had been a couple of years before; and could Claude de Beriot



have risen from his grave, he would hardly have recognised in her the glowing, animated, enthusiastic creature who had been so ready to sacrifice everything for his sake.

“What do you wish me to do?” she repeated, as she gazed at Mrs. Capel with her sorrowful expression.

“To do as other people do, my dear. To mix in society and shake off all this romantic mourning that is the very worst compliment you can pay to your present husband. In fact, I wonder he has stood it so long.”

“But I doubt whether he would accept the alternative,” replied Alda, eagerly. “His health is very poor, mamma, and I do not believe he could stand much excitement or fatigue. He sleeps so badly at night that it is impossible that I can get unbroken rest. And the least annoyance or worry—anything that upsets him, in fact—will send him to his own room for days.”

“Why does he not see a doctor?”

“That is another of his strange notions.

He declares that all doctors are fools or rogues, and that he will dismiss the first servant who admits one over the threshold. I suppose he is growing old, mamma—he is very old, isn't he?—and the best way is to humour him in everything.”

“Oh, as to age, my dear, that's nothing! He cannot be more than fifty; but I really think his health is very much broken down of late. He has never seemed the same man to me since he heard the news of your marriage with Monsieur de Beriot. I am afraid you have a good deal to answer for in regard to him, you naughty puss.”

“Sometimes I think so, too,” said the girl, softly, “and it makes me—it makes me *bear* things better than I should otherwise do. I hope I make him happier by being here. He never tells me to the contrary. But you see, mamma, that it would be impossible for us to go out until his health is stronger.”

“Nonsense, Alda,” replied Mrs. Capel, to

whose prophetic vision the probable demise of a second son-in-law did not appear at all in the light of a calamity. "Of course, it would be advisable that Lord Sidney should appear with you for the first few times in public, but after that you could go alone. What is the good of being a married woman else? And when young ladies marry gentlemen old enough to be their fathers, it is not to be expected that they should always engage in the same pursuits and pleasures."

"Then I think it is better I should remain with my birds and flowers," said Lady Sidney Carleton.

Her mother felt she would like to shake her for her obstinacy and want of interest.

It was quite true that Mr. Capel was as annoyed as his wife at the seclusion of his daughter and son-in-law. For the first time in the course of their long friendship he felt disposed to be angry with Lord Sidney Carleton, and he was determined to tell him so. It seemed as if he had married Alda

under false pretences. It was true that he denied her nothing. She had her horses and carriages, her dogs, and hot-houses, and servants, but excess of indulgence in having her own way was as hurtful for a young girl as too much restriction, and Mr. Capel considered that Lord Sidney would not do his duty unless he compelled Alda to enter the society she was so well fitted to adorn.

He broached the subject, therefore, that same evening as he and his host sat over their wine together.

"How soon are you and Alda coming up to town, Sid?" he asked, carelessly, as though the fact admitted of no question.

"To town!" repeated Lord Sidney. "This year, you mean? Well, I don't think we shall go at all. Alda seems to have no wish to leave Mabyn Fields."

If there had been a difference between these men before, it was more marked than ever now. Mr. Capel had always been the younger looking, the handsomer, and the

more genial of the two ; but now he might almost have passed for Lord Sidney's son. No one, seeing his upright figure, clear healthy complexion, and thick head of hair, would have credited him with being a couple of years older than the bent, attenuated, sallow man who sat opposite to him, and poured out his wine with such an unsteady hand.

The contrast seemed to have struck Mr. Capel himself to-night for the first time, and he wondered how he could ever have imagined his daughter would consent to marry his friend without a little hesitation.

However, she had done so at last, and it was her father's duty to see that she made the best of her position.

“What have Alda's likes or dislikes to do in the matter, Sid?” he replied, rather sharply, to his son-in-law's remark. “She is but a child, and does not know what is best for herself. I am thinking of your duty to society—not of your wife's fancies. And it most certainly is your duty to bring her to

London this season, and introduce her at Court."

"We are very happy here," said Lord Sidney, evasively. "I often ask her if there is anything in the world I can get for her? and she says, 'No'—that she has everything she wants. In fact, she shrinks from society. You know it was a kind of promise when we married, Capel, that she was to have her own way in this particular, and not to be forced into gaiety against her will. And she is really quite contented to live down here, and never seems to desire anything further, and therefore I cannot see the advantage there would be in changing her mode of life or mine."

Mr. Capel lay back in his chair, and regarded his friend with surprise.

Lord Sidney was evidently shuffling with him, for he never looked him in the face as he spoke, and now, as he observed his action, he turned his head away, and pretended to be busy with his shoe-string.

"And so you intend," said Mr. Capel, sar-

cassically, after a short pause, which rendered his remarks still more pungent ; “ you intend to allow Lady Sidney Carleton—your wife—to go on nursing a sickly, sentimental grief for that dead rascal, because you have not sufficient energy to help her to shake it off by taking a little trouble upon yourself !”

He knew the shaft would tell. Lord Sidney turned green with jealousy, although he professed not to understand the other’s meaning.

“ I do not know what you allude to,” he stammered. “ My wife is perfectly happy, as far as I know, and grieves for nothing or nobody.”

“ Come, come, Sid ! It is useless for you and me to stand on ceremony with each other, and particularly where there is a stake of importance at issue. You know as well as I do that the girl was in love with that dead man when you married her, and from all accounts he seems to have been one of those handsome, romantic-looking rascals that

young women find it very difficult to forget. And you are going the very way to make her remember him. You plant her down here with no other company but the flowers, and the stars, and the birds, and all that sort of rubbish, and you let her wander about alone at moonlight, when, doubtless, she nurses all kinds of absurd and sickly fancies about this scoundrel of an artist, whom she probably depicts as a bodiless cherub hovering over her wherever she goes. How do you expect the girl to recover at that rate?”

“But I have not thought—I did not believe,” commenced Lord Sidney.

And then his feelings overcoming his eloquence, he burst out, suddenly—

“D——n it all! I made sure she had forgotten the brute, and what more would you have?”


“What is she always dressed in those ridiculous colours for, then?” demanded Mr. Capel. “Why does she never wear any



ornaments—never see any visitors who may happen to call—never express the least desire to go anywhere or do anything? God bless my soul, Sid, you must be blind! And instead of taking her out to balls and parties, and theatres, and letting her associate with plenty of nice men and women, you coop her up in this dull place, and don't even take the trouble to share in her amusements or occupations. Why, I've hardly ever seen you together except at meal times, since I came here!"

"But our tastes are naturally so dissimilar," urged Lord Sidney. "You would hardly expect me to take pleasure in feeding puppies, or sowing flower seeds, as Alda does."

"Then you must draw her out to take an interest in your occupations. I tell you what it is, Sid. A girl of that age can't be without sympathy and companionship, and if you don't bestir yourself to give it her, you'll wake up to find she is on intimate terms with the gardener, or the bailiff, or the lady's maid, or anyone, in fact, who has shown an



interest in her trouble, or created a diversion from it."

"Good heavens!" muttered Lord Sidney, as he paced up and down the room, wiping away the moisture that agitation had called forth upon his brow, "what an awful alternative you present to me. We must either tear ourselves away from this quiet retreat, to mix in the clamour and folly of the season, which is equally distasteful to both of us, or I must learn to believe that my wife's thoughts are all fixed upon the past, and her professed interest in the present is a mere delusion which everyone sees through but myself."

Mr. Capel saw that he had roused the husband's jealousy, the most powerful weapon to be wielded above the head of either man or woman, and was not slow to follow up his advantage.

"I speak to you as a man of the world, Carleton," he said, "and judge my daughter as I should judge any other woman. I do

not suppose she is above the weakness of her sex. And if she has blinded you to the fact that she is fretting after young De Beriot, it is only a proof of the goodness of her nature. Some wives might not have taken the trouble to conceal their grief. But I repeat that it is your duty to try and help her to shake it off."

"I will take her to London at once," said Lord Sidney, eagerly. "Let me see! This is April. In a month, at latest, we can have a house made ready for our reception. If this place is to nurture her remembrance of that scoundrel, she shall never set foot in it again."

"Now you are running into extremes," said Mr. Capel, "which is quite unnecessary. If you turn yourself into a tyrant you will do more harm than good. Have your own way, but let the girl think she is having hers. Give her a taste of dissipation, and you will see her take to it kindly enough. It is to women what the dram is to the

drunkard. And, mark my words, that, after a season in town, you'll be troubled with no more long looks and black dresses on the part of Lady Sidney Carleton."

This conversation sank deep into the heart of the man to whom it was addressed. His married life had proved a great disappointment to him—not with regard to his wife, but himself. He had dreamed of it, and longed for it, and waited for it so long that he had imagined when it came that it would be a sort of heaven upon earth.

But to accomplish that end, even for a brief period, there must be two hearts to love, two souls to sympathise, two hands to lie in each other, and feel that they enclose the world.

It was the old story, in less simple language, of Rosamond and her purple jar. Lord Sidney had secured the case of his coveted possession, but the colour, and the glow, and the light had departed from it. Not but that Alda had always been sweet

and good to him, but from the first she had treated him as a daughter treats her father, and gradually he had come to accept the terms she offered, and to drop the lover in the middle-aged husband.

He had ceased to press endearments on her, or fulsome compliments, and their intercourse had toned down to what the lives of most married people become—a polite interchange of courtesies and apparent interest on a substratum of indifference and a fixed—if unconfessed—determination to go their own way.

Until Mr. and Mrs. Capel sowed the seeds of suspicion in Lord Sidney's breast, he had flattered himself that the fault, if there were any, lay with himself, and he had no more blamed his wife for his disappointment than he would have blamed a tempting dish at dinner that proved less appetising than its appearance promised.

He had very little experience of women and their ways, and believed it probable that

any one of the sex would, like Alda, have belied her looks upon a nearer inspection.

But now his eyes seemed to have been suddenly opened, and he saw that the reason of her subdued manner, her continual silence, and her pale looks, was that her thoughts were still in the Villa Candesi at Florence, and her heart buried in the grave of the murdered man.

The thought roused all the energy of Lord Sidney's character. He had made too sure of Alda's goodness. He had placed too much belief in her placid looks and composed manner; too much faith in her expressions of gratitude and contentment.

He had imagined that it all meant she had forgotten Claude de Beriot, whereas it only proved that she tolerated her husband because he permitted her to remember him.

But Lord Sidney determined, if change of scene and place could do it, he would root out that memory from his wife's breast as if it were a deadly fungus. His own heart was

on fire with jealousy of the dead man, and hatred of his handsome, youthful face. He would obliterate the image from Alda's mind, if he had to take her on a voyage round the world in order to do it.

And it was with his mind full of this intention that, as soon as he could leave the dining-room, he sought the presence of his wife.



## CHAPTER II.

“WHAT HAVE I DONE THAT HE SHOULD ROB  
ME OF THIS?”

ALDA was not in the drawing-room with her mother when the gentlemen entered it. She had left some time before, Mrs. Capel said, and she believed she was in her own apartments.

Lord Sidney, therefore, took an early opportunity to quit the room again, and as the door closed behind him, Mr. Capel addressed his wife.

“I have squared Sidney, my dear, and he is going to secure a town house for the season at once. I told him I was sure Alda was still



fretting after De Beriot, and the only cure was to take her into society. You should have seen how green he turned! He evidently did not like the idea of playing second fiddle longer than necessary."

"Dear me, Mr. Capel, I hope you did not say too much! He might visit it on the poor child's head. But it really is time that something was done. I directed Parker when we quitted home to pack up all the things that Alda had left behind her on the occasion of her unfortunate flight with that disreputable young man, and which she has never looked at since her return. They were unpacked this afternoon, and I can assure you I was quite shocked at the effect they seemed to have upon her. Such a want of control and proper self-respect! I never can believe that Madame Richabaut was a fit person to educate young ladies, when she sent them home so entirely unfitted to take their place in the world."

"Poor little girl," said Mr. Capel, who was

in reality far softer-hearted than his weak and foolish wife ; "and does the sight of her old clothes upset her ? It is a pity you didn't throw them in the fire."

"Oh, it was not the dresses only, Mr. Capel, although she did cry in an absurd manner over that green travelling costume which I always so much disliked. But there was a portfolio of her school drawings which I had entirely overlooked, and amongst them a sketch of that—that person——"

"Why can't you say of Monsieur de Beriot at once?" interrupted Mr. Capel, impatiently. "Hang it all, the man was her husband, and it is of no use carrying your animosity against him into the grave."

"Really, Mr. Capel, this language to me——"

"Well, you provoke me to it with your nonsense. However, go on. De Beriot's portrait turned up—though why you were so careless as to let it do so I can't imagine——

and our poor child was made miserable by the sight. What else?"

"If you will excuse me," said Mrs. Capel, with that extreme politeness with which fools generally signify that they are offended, "I would prefer to say no more, since my remarks only appear to be the unhappy cause of provoking expressions which——"

But here her eloquence was cut short by a most uncomplimentary rejoinder, coupled with the disappearance of her husband and the slamming of the drawing-room door.

Meanwhile, Lord Sidney had entered his wife's boudoir, where he found her sitting pensively in an armchair, with the tears upon her cheek.

The sight of the sketches in the old portfolio had upset her terribly—far more so than she had confessed to her mother—for she had not had the courage to examine them whilst in her presence or that of Parker.

But as soon as the ladies were released from the dinner-table, a great longing had

crept over Alda to gaze once more on the portraiture of that face which had been so dear to her, and she had stolen away to her own room and taken the portfolio in her trembling hands as if she had been opening a tomb. There are few of us who do not know what it is to receive a portrait of the dead after they have been hidden from our sight, and to feel as if we dared not look upon the laughing, living features and compare them with the closed eyes and sealed mouth that met our vision last.

Alda had to stop more than once to swallow down the sob that rose even at the thought of her dead Claude before she could summon up courage to gaze upon his pencilled lineaments. And when at last she made an effort, and suddenly turned round the sheet of cartridge paper that contained them, how familiar and dear they looked, how difficult it was to believe that all the past was not a dream, and that this was not the likeness of Claude as he then existed, laughing, moving,

living, with his beautiful eyes upraised to heaven, and his dark hair thrown carelessly from his brow !

Alda's grief for the loss of her young husband had become by this time subdued and holy. It was two years since he had been laid in his grave at Florence, and she could think of him as happy in another world, and be content to wait until she joined him there.

All the brightness and beauty of life had departed for her, but she was not despondent nor repining, and, excepting when the tender chord of her lost love was rudely touched—as in the case of her conversation with her mother that afternoon—she did not display any feeling, nor utter a word of complaint.

But the sight of the old sketch, taken when she and Claude had been so happy and careless in the flush of their young love at Rouen, was too much for her perfect equa-

nimity, and Alda felt it a real luxury to be able to sit by herself in the quiet evening and think over the past and keep its memory green by a few not rebellious tears.

She was indulging herself thus when Lord Sidney suddenly entered the room. As soon as Alda perceived who was her visitor, she rose gracefully from her seat to receive him.

She did not take the trouble to conceal that she had been crying, for her husband had never found fault with her before for a little melancholy or a few quiet tears, and she had no idea that he would do so now. And the voice in which she greeted him ought to have convinced any man, not blinded by jealousy, that his presence was welcome to her rather than the reverse.

"So you have come to pay me a visit, Sidney?" she said, cheerfully, as she pushed a chair towards him, and turned up the light of the reading-lamp that stood by her side. "Has mamma frightened you away from the

drawing-room by a description of the spring fashions, that you have been compelled to seek refuge with me ?”

“I have hardly spoken to your mother,” he answered, in a rougher tone than she had ever heard him use before, “but I have followed you to know why you absent yourself from your proper place. I should have thought that even your ignorance would have made you aware that after dinner the mistress of a house usually remains in the drawing-room with her guests.”

Alda was both hurt and surprised by his manner, but she did not resent it.

“With strangers, certainly,” she said, “but I hardly look upon mamma and papa in the light of visitors, and I am sure they would be the first to regret it if I did not behave exactly the same whilst they are staying here as I do in their absence.”

“Perhaps so,” replied Lord Sidney ; “but whether we are alone or not, I consider that you are neglecting your duty in shutting

yourself up in your private apartments at such unusual hours."

"What has put this idea into your head to-day, Sidney?" she demanded, in a tone of quiet surprise. "During all the months that we have lived at Mabyn Fields together, you have never spoken to me of such a thing before. I have been allowed to sit upstairs or downstairs—alone, or in your company, just as I pleased, without any comment on your part. Why should you suddenly attack me on the subject as if I had done something wrong?"

"Because I trusted you—I believed in you. I did not know that the reason for which you sat alone for hours together was that you might mope and mourn over the memory of that rascal, to whose obscure family, had it not been for me, you might have been linked to this day—or worse, Lady Sidney, worse, for whom you might have suffered at the hands of the law."

Alda rose from her chair and stood before



her husband, regarding him steadfastly. During the course of their married life he had never dared to mention the name of Claude de Beriot to her otherwise than with respect; indeed, he had scarcely ever alluded to the past, had seemed to shrink from it as much as herself, and when she introduced the subject had dismissed it with a delicacy that inspired her with gratitude.

To hear him, therefore, speak so coarsely of a memory which she held sacred, roused her keenest indignation, and the old flash of anger rose to her eyes as she answered his address.

“Don’t mention my dead husband before me in those terms, for I won’t stand it!” she exclaimed, quickly, and then, lowering her tone, she continued: “Forgive me, Sidney. I should not have said that; but you know how very dear Claude was to me.”

The assertion still further roused his anger.

“Yes, I do know it, Lady Sidney, to my

cost ; and what is more, every servant on the premises knows it too. It seems to be no secret at Mabyn Fields why the mistress shuts herself up in her own apartments half the day, or wanders about the grounds alone for hours together. Even your father and mother have noticed the scandal, and warned me of the probable consequences if I do not put a stop to it."

"Have you told my father and mother of the terms on which I married you, Lord Sidney?"

"There were no terms except such as every wife takes upon herself, to honour and obey her husband ; and it is not honouring me when you let the whole world see that you are fretting after a man who lured you away from your duty and your home."

"You are not speaking the truth," replied Alda, with dignity. "If your memory cannot recall the interview that took place between us the day I consented to become your wife, mine is more to be depended on."

I told you then plainly that it was *impossible* for me to forget Claude, and you said you would be content to fill the lower place in my affections."

"The more fool if I did," interposed Lord Sidney.

"Perhaps so. I will not deny it. I told you then that I was not worth the trouble you wished to bestow upon me. But I cannot be untrue to myself or—or—to *him*."

"You confess, then, that you are still grieving over this man's death, and that the reason you isolate yourself in this absurd manner is that you may indulge in the tears and sighs that you dare not show before me? Come, you had better make a clean breast of it at once, and let me know the worst."

"Oh, Sidney, don't be hard upon me. If I have done it in secret it has been from a desire not to pain you. The worst is that I am too faithful to the memory of the man whom I loved, and who loved me. Heaven

forgive me if it be a sin, but I cannot shake it off—not just yet. I try to do so—indeed I do; but—but—he was the first, and it seems such a little time ago.”

As the last words left her lips, her voice faltered, and the tears fell down her face. She was obliged to take out her handkerchief to wipe them away, and the sight of her emotion drove Lord Sidney frantic. He rose from his seat and paced restlessly about the little room.

Was this the end of his aspirations to make this woman his wife? This the object for which he had striven and suffered, and would have died? She had been married to him for twelve months, and she still wept at the mention of that obscure artist, who had been able to give her neither money nor position—nothing, in fact, but a love which she returned. It was absurd—worse than absurd—it was maddening, and Lord Sidney was resolved to end it at once.

“Put down that handkerchief,” he said,

almost brutally, as he twitched it from her hand and threw it on the floor. "If you cannot control your feelings out of my presence, you shall at least learn to do so whilst in it. You ought to be ashamed to have so little self-command—so little sense of what is due to my position and your own. You have no more notion how to fill the high station to which I have raised you than a child of ten years old; but you must be taught it, and without delay."

"If I may not do as I choose in your presence, Lord Sidney, I, at least, have the option of leaving it," she replied, proudly, as she attempted to quit the apartment.

But he detained her.

"Not so, Alda. I insist upon your remaining here until we have come to an explanation."

"What explanation can we arrive at? You object to see me weep? Very good. You are not likely to do so again. But you cannot prevent my heart weeping, both for

the past and the present. I thought at least I was to have peace in our married life, but your words to-night have undeceived me."

"If I am powerless to prevent your grieving secretly, I can at least forbid your keeping any tokens which may increase your morbid state of mind," replied Lord Sidney, as he caught sight of the crayon sketch that lay upon the table. "Look at this! Do you call this a proper memento for a married woman to cherish—the portrait of a lover whom she has promised to do her best to forget?"

"The portrait of her *first husband*, you mean," exclaimed Alda.

"He was never your husband," returned Lord Sidney.

"How *dare* you say so?"

"Because I do not believe in the legality of the marriage which he inveigled you into."

"There was no inveigling in the matter. I married him of my own free will."

"You ought to be ashamed to acknowledge

it. Anyway, I am not proud of the fact, if you are, and I prefer to destroy all reminiscences of so disgraceful an affair."

He seized the crayon drawing as he spoke and tore it into half a dozen pieces. As Alda saw the beloved features, the only likeness she possessed of her dead husband, ruined and destroyed, she felt for the moment as sharp a pain as though she had stood by to see Claude himself mangled and scattered to the winds. At first she could hardly believe her senses; when she did, she was transformed into a fiend.

"You brute!" she exclaimed, "you heartless, wicked brute. Oh, my Claude! my angel Claude! What have I done that he should rob me even of this paltry resemblance of you?"

She gathered up the morsels of paper as she spoke, and pressed them, sobbing, to her mouth and breast.

When Lord Sidney realised what had happened, he trembled. He saw that he had

gone too far, and that he might never be able to repair the injury he had done himself.

The look of scorn which his wife cast at him as he attempted to approach her cut him to the heart.

"I have been too hasty," he pleaded, "but you must put it down to my affection, Alda. I cannot bear to think that I have no power to make you happy."

But she would not listen to him. She was wailing over her ruined picture as if it had been a dead child.

"Think what I suffered in order to make you my wife," continued Lord Sidney; "think of the trouble I took, of the danger I had to brave. You do not know half the risk I ran in order to save you from the malignity of Madame de Beriot. Had you fallen into her clutches, had you been left to her mercy, where would you have been now?"

"You might as well have abandoned me to my fate," murmured Alda through her



tears, "for nothing could be worse than the life of torture to which you will condemn me if neither my thoughts nor my actions are to be my own."

"But you do not know what you escaped," he answered. "You have no conception of the terrible evidence which she had gathered to produce against you. But I combated it all. By force of money, and energy, and strength of will, I fought and overcame your enemies, and are you surprised now that I am disappointed to find that all my trouble has been of no avail, and I have saved you only to bewail his loss?"

"Sidney," said Alda, as she raised her mournful eyes to her husband, "have I been ungrateful to you for all this? Was it not to try and repay the debt I owed you that I became your wife? And whilst you let me live the peaceful life which, until now, we have enjoyed together, there was more than gratitude in my heart for you—there was affection, or something very like it; but you

have given it its deathblow to-night. You have shown me your true character; you have spoken of my dead husband in terms that I can neither forgive nor forget, and from this moment I will never again attempt to root up one thought of him from my heart. There is no sin in my cherishing his memory, no law that can prevent my doing so, and if all the world scorns or ignores it, my breast shall be its shrine until I die.”

“Since you are resolved to adhere to your present line of conduct,” replied Lord Sidney, his temporary softness evaporating under the determination of her manner, “I have, at least, the power to prevent your carrying it on in a place where no action on your part or mine can go unobserved. You will have to bid farewell, therefore, to your dogs, and cats, and birds, Lady Sidney, for we shall leave Mabyn Fields next month, and settle in London for the season, or as long as I see fit to remain there.”

He had expected she would loudly lament over a prospect so opposed to all the wishes she had ever expressed on the subject, but, to his surprise, she said nothing.

She was, in fact, both startled and annoyed at his announcement, but she knew that even a semblance of opposition on her part would only make him more determined to have his own way.

“You have altered your opinion lately, perhaps,” he continued, sarcastically, “and think now that a little change to the pleasures of the town would not be disagreeable to you. Two years is a long period for a widow to wear her mourning nowadays, and I should not even be astonished to hear that you had merely retained yours to open my eyes to the necessity of forcing you into the world of fashion to make you resume a dress more befitting my wife’s position. Is it so?”

“You can think what you like, Lord Sidney,” she answered, quickly. “One of the conditions of our marriage was that we

should live in the country, but I release you from your promise. In one particular you are right. If I am to lose my liberty at Mabyn Fields, Mabyn Fields will have lost its charm for me, and if I have no friends in the country, the sooner I go to town to make some the better. As to my grey dresses, I only asked your permission to wear them for a twelvemonth. The time has nearly expired, and I will discard them to-morrow. And now, if you will allow me, I will join my mother and tell her of our intended presence in London during the season.”

She swept past him as she spoke, and left him in the boudoir, confounded at the manner in which she had accepted his proposal to leave Mabyn Fields. He had never imagined she would accede to it. He had thought she would cry, and remind him of his word, and promise anything if he would not drag her into a society the idea of which was so distasteful to her.

For to tell the truth, though Lord Sidney,

in the first flush of his awakened jealousy, had declared he would take his wife anywhere in order to distract her attention from the past, he was far more averse to mixing in the dissipations of London than herself. He had never been what is termed a "society man." All his life he had shrunk rather than otherwise from scenes of gaiety, and when he entered them with the Capels, it was to meet Alda only that he went.

When, before their marriage, therefore, she had made it a condition that they should live in the country, he had been delighted to accede to her proposal. He would have liked to bury himself with her in the farthest corners of the earth, had it been possible.

And though his married life had turned out a great disappointment to him, and he had discovered the fatal secret that so many men have done before him, and will do hereafter, that a one-sided love can only prove a root of bitterness to the lover, he still felt that his life would be more bearable down at

Mabyn Fields, where there were no witnesses to its failure, and where Alda perforce turned to him for companionship and counsel.

What their existence would become in the wear and tear of London life, where her beauty would make her the admired and sought after of all beholders, and he would degenerate into nothing but Lady Sidney Carleton's husband, the man shuddered to contemplate.

But he had done the deed himself. He had promised to take the father's advice, and had laid his commands upon the daughter, and he could give no good reason for going back from his expressed resolution now.

And, added to the rest, he felt that in wounding Alda's heart that night he had played the worst card that could have turned up in his own cause.

After half an hour of solitude and self-reproach, he, too, crept down to the drawing-room, half expecting to be met by blame from the assembled family. But, on the contrary,

all seemed to be in a condition of pleasurable anticipation. Mr. Capel was talking eagerly of the various merits and conveniences of Eaton Square, Grosvenor Square, and Portland Place; whilst Alda, kneeling at her mother's side, tried to combat her entreaties that she would be presented at Court dressed entirely in white by reminding her that so matured a matron as herself would certainly be expected to appear in colours.

Lord Sidney threw himself upon a couch and listened to the conversation, groaning inwardly. His fate was fixed, and he had brought it all on his own head. No one was to blame for it but himself.



### CHAPTER III.

“ MY LADY CARES NO MORE FOR THEM THAN  
YOU DO !”

As he anticipated, Lord Sidney Carleton was allowed no respite from either Mr. or Mrs. Capel until he had carried his project of engaging a town house into execution.

The family mansion was the property of his elder brother, and he had always occupied chambers whilst in London himself; therefore the new residence had to be fixed upon and furnished—a task of which he found his father-in-law only too ready to relieve him.

Before the month prior to the commencement of the season had expired, a handsome



house in Portland Place had been taken for the reception of himself and his wife, and one of the principal upholsterers in London directed to furnish it, regardless of cost.

During this period of miserable suspense, which Lord Sidney spent down at Mabyn Fields, he lived in daily hope that Alda might come and beg him to give up the idea of passing the season in town. But the time went on, and the girl made no sign.

At first she had been startled and half frightened at the prospect before her. It had seemed like an insult to her dead Claude that she should put on pink and blue dresses, and rush into scenes of music and dancing and singing, whilst he lay cold and solitary in his far-off grave.

But her mother's persuasions, and a few days spent alone with her husband, after her parents' return to Berkeley Square, had convinced her that her scruples were foolish.

Should she not carry Claude's unforgotten image about her wherever she went, and

could it make any difference to him if a band were clashing in her ears, or a nightingale singing in the woods? And for her there were to be no more nightingale's songs heard amidst a solitude that made her liken them to the voices of angels.

From the moment her father and mother left Mabyn Fields, Lord Sidney never allowed her to be alone. If she strolled in the garden he was sure to meet her; if she retired to her own room he followed her there. His newly aroused jealousy seemed to vent itself on everything that she appeared to like. He would even kick the unoffending hound that raised its head for her caress.

He showed himself to her in a lower and more contemptible light than she had believed him capable of doing. Even her very thoughts were not held sacred, for if she kept silence for a few minutes together, he would inquire, in a sneering tone, if they had gone to heaven or the other place.

At last she learned almost to hate him,

and to look forward with feverish anxiety to the hour when the responsibilities which a large house and circle of acquaintance must entail upon her would afford her escape from his continual presence and sarcastic remarks.

When the day arrived for their return from Mabyn Fields, she was all expectation and he despondency. One might have thought he was going to meet his doom, from the tone of his voice and the depression of his spirits.

Had Lord Sidney obtained his own way, they would have lived almost as quiet a life in London as they had done in the country, but Mr. and Mrs. Capel had provided against such a contingency. They had no intention that the light of their beautiful Alda should be hid any longer under a bushel.

The house in Portland Place was already victualled and garrisoned for a long and fashionable siege ; cards sent out to announce the arrival of Lord and Lady Sidney Carleton, and dinners and dances arranged ready

to return the invitations which were certain to pour in upon them.

The parent birds were not disappointed in their expectations. Hardly was Alda's presence in London an accepted fact before her hall-door was assailed by carriages, and her table laden with visiting-cards ; and as soon as she had appeared at the drawing-room her beauty became the topic of the hour. And, indeed, few who had seen her in her schoolgirl's dresses at Rouen, or her mourning garb at Mabyn Fields, would have recognised the brilliant beauty who broke that year upon the world of fashion.

Grief and carelessness of her personal appearance, if they had been powerless to obliterate her loveliness, had certainly contrived to keep it in the shade, to which end her unattractive dress had largely contributed. But to see her now, as she emerged from the hands of a Court milliner and a Court hair-dresser, her beauty shown off to the best advantage by every adjunct that money could

procure, one would have said she was a planet that made all lesser luminaries pale in her presence.

Lord Sidney would gaze at her, almost dazzled by the brilliance of her appearance as she stood before him, clad in satin and lace, with diamonds flashing on her neck and bosom. Her hair, no longer pulled off her face and twisted up in a knot at the back of her head, but arranged according to the latest mode, and in the most advantageous manner for showing off her features ; her cheeks, that used to be so pale, flushed with excitement, her white, rounded arms and breast laden with jewellery, she looked a queen amongst women, and had but to appear to be followed and *fêted* like one.

Nobody who had seen Alda Carleton one month after she had taken possession of that house in Portland Place, would have believed but that she had been used to scenes of gaiety all her life, and cared for nothing higher.

She accepted every invitation that was extended to her, and flew from dinners to balls, and from garden parties to concerts, as if she had but one aim in life—to see and to be seen.

Her mother was enchanted by the unexpected energy with which she entered upon the pursuit of pleasure, and often remarked to her husband that she knew Alda had only to be initiated into the delights of society to become its most enthusiastic votary, and that the dear girl’s brilliant success excelled everything that she had ever hoped for her.

Mr. Capel was not quite so excited by the *éclat* of his daughter’s *début*. He had wished her to take her proper place in the world, and put a stop to the ill-natured comments that had been made on her seclusion; but he had quite expected that Lord Sidney would accompany his wife wherever she might go, and not leave her to be chaperoned by her mother, or to visit by herself.

“She is a great deal too handsome and a

great deal too young to go about alone," he grumbled to Mrs. Capel; "and I should like to know what Sidney is about to allow it. He is so quick to fire up and take offence if I give him the least hint on the subject, and yet he remains at home, night after night, whilst Alda is whirling round in the arms of young Bampton or some other frivolous fop of the same sort. If Sid doesn't take better care of the girl she'll come to grief, and then there'll be a pretty kettle of fish."

"Dear me, Mr. Capel, I wish you wouldn't say such unpleasant things. Alda does no more than any other young married woman of her standing. I am sure Lady Cecilia Bremton is *never* seen with her husband, and yet no one dares to say a word against her. It is not the fashion for married people to go about together nowadays. It is considered altogether *rococo* and out of date."

"I know it is! The proper thing is to go about with somebody else's husband."

"Really, Mr. Capel, your allusions get

grosser every day ; but, at all events, you cannot say such things of our Alda. Everyone agrees she is discretion itself !”

“Perhaps so. There’s safety in numbers. But now I hear that she is going to show herself off by acting on a public stage in company with young Bampton and a lot of other fools. What will Carleton let her do next ?”

“Oh, Mr. Capel, that is what *all* the ladies do now! They are going to act for a charity, so no one could possibly object. And they are almost all members of the aristocracy, so they are sure to get favourable notices, whether they perform well or not.”

“And Sid will sit at home meanwhile, and sulk over his claret while his wife is going to the devil——”

“It is *Lord Bampton* who plays with dear Alda, Mr. Capel,” said the lady, in a tone of mild reproof. “And if Lord Sidney is so lazy or so indifferent to what his wife does, I think he deserves everything that may



happen to him, and you may tell him I said so !”

“Bravo !” cried Mr. Capel, amused by her unusual burst of spirit. “I think you’re quite right, my dear, though I don’t credit our girl with anything worse than getting herself talked about ! But Sid is growing terribly old of late. I cannot think what has come to him. He refuses to take part in even a game of billiards or cards, nor will he be induced to accompany me anywhere. He seems to shrink from the sight of any strangers.”

“He is not in good health, Mr. Capel. Anyone could see that. He has shrunk to half his size during the last year. I should not be at all surprised if our *Alda* is a widow again before long. And what a wealthy, handsome, youthful widow she will be. The world will go mad about her.”

“Hang the world !” exclaimed Mr. Capel, impatiently. “It has gone quite mad enough about her already.”

And then he added, "Poor old Sid!" and seemed lost in contemplation of the new thought that had been presented to him.

But what they had said was quite true. Lord Sidney, who, during the months they spent at Mabyn Fields, had refused to let his wife take a walk in the garden without him, now saw her running about, night after night, from one place of amusement to another, without making an effort to restrain her apparent love of dissipation, or to accompany her to the houses of her friends.

He seemed, all of a sudden, to have grown afraid of this woman to whom he had betrayed himself in his true character, and to avoid the glance of the flashing hazel eyes that so often showed their amber light when they turned upon him now.

Down in the country, mourning for Claude de Beriot, Alda had appeared as a simple, somewhat timid girl to him, but since he had insulted her love and forced her from her seclusion, she had developed into a woman of

the world who had but one desire—to escape as much as possible from her own house and his society.

Lady Sidney Carleton's maid, who was sincerely attached to her young mistress, confided to Parker's sympathising ear her own opinion on the subject.

“Lor', Mrs. Parker, my lady cares no more for them dances, and theatricals, and concerts than you do. Many and many's the time, when I've been dressing her for them, that she's sighed fit to break her heart, and says she, 'Oh, Rosa,' she says, 'I wish I was dead, and there was an end to it all!' It is to get rid of him, you may depend upon it, and nothing else, that makes the poor dear gad about so, and I don't wonder at it, for, inside and outside, he's as twisted as can be, and just the moral of a corkscrew.”

“Ah,” replied Parker, with an oracular shake of the head, “her poor heart's broke—and that's the long and the short of it, Rosa. If you had seen her as I did, when she'd got

her affair on with that other young man as she was married to, you'd never forget it. Why, she blushed like a rose only to speak of him ! And he *was* handsome, too. There was a picture of him we had, lying about here, that was more like an angel than a human ; and he came by such a cruel death ! I wonder at the poor thing holding up her head as well as she do, bless her ! for she only married this old lord to please her pa and ma. All the world knew that, and she was grieving like anything the while ; and I know, for one, that if that young man as is dead could come back from his grave to claim her, she'd be off like a shot and leave all this frippery, and going about, and dancing, and such like, behind her without a murmur.”

“ Ah, that I dare say,” rejoined Rosa, “ and small blame to her, either ; for when they're handsome they *are* a snare, and no mistake. I kept company once for eighteen months with a policeman ; and, Lor', Mrs. Parker, if you'd seen that feller's eyes and

hair, you'd never have forgot them. But there, he went and married a housemaid, and behaved very false to me, so I only thinks of him with spurn ; for I've got my pride, Mrs. Parker, though I *am* a servant."

Other people discussed poor Alda in her waywardness beside the lady's-maids ; women in the same sphere of life as herself tore her heart to pieces and dissected her motives, and put the worst construction possible on everything she said or did. Amongst the first friends who had welcomed her back to London had been Mrs. Elliot, the lively little widow who had escorted her from Calais to Dover on the fatal occasion when she had married Claude de Beriot.

Mrs. Elliot had always liked Alda, and taken a great interest in her subsequent career, and since they had renewed their acquaintanceship it had blossomed into a confidential friendship. Mrs. Elliot was the only person in London beside her parents for whom Alda really cared, and the ladies felt

they were as welcome at each other's houses as they were at their own.

The widow remained a widow still. During the last two years she had had more than one opportunity of changing her condition and re-entering the married state; but she said, laughing, that she knew when she had had enough of a good thing—by which she meant of a bad one—and preferred to remain as she was—well-off, independent, and her own mistress.

She was a very popular and sociable little woman, notwithstanding; and no gatherings were better attended by her own sex than the "at homes" which she held on every Tuesday afternoon in Kensington Gardens Square, and at which Lady Sidney Carleton usually appeared to support her friend.

On one particular Tuesday, however, she happened to be absent, and was consequently a fair mark for the shafts of scandal discharged by the bevy of ladies assembled in Mrs. Elliot's drawing-room.

They were mostly women of fashion, and admirably fitted in their different ways to sit in judgment on their fellow-creatures.

There was Lady Selina Oldham, who had been married once upon a time, and gone through such disgraceful scenes with her husband in the shape of throwing the articles of household furniture at his head, and using bad language, that when the court pronounced a judicial separation between them, it would not permit Lady Selina to have access to her female children.

Half of the alimony allowed her went at the present moment into the hands of her doctor, who made an excellent thing of patching her up daily, so that she might be able to stand straight in society. Of course, all the world knew that there was a chance of the occasion arising where Lady Selina might need a little friendly support on her way home again; but that made her acquaintanceship all the more exciting, and afforded her friends a topic of conversation as

soon as her back was turned. Meanwhile, they listened to her strictures on the weaknesses of other females with the utmost gravity.

Mrs. Onyx Grey was sitting next to Lady Selina on the present occasion. She was a strictly moral person. How could she be otherwise, with one of the gravest and best known divines in London for a husband and protector, one who trusted her, moreover, to receive and visit all his friends and patrons by herself, whilst he was occupied in his professional duties ?

There were certain Guardsmen and other dangerous creatures of the same ilk who would—if Guardsmen ever reveal a secret—have given a different sort of character to the wife of the Reverend Onyx Grey ; but few men can be found to kiss and tell, and the parson in all probability died in the same blissful ignorance in which he lived. And then Mrs. Onyx Grey was so *very* particular never to have her name associated with that



of any woman who had been *found out*, that it was impossible for the breath of scandal to reach her.

She even frowned upon the very men she had made love to if they presumed to mention anyone in her presence who was less cautious in concealing her peccadilloes than herself. Happy Onyx Grey! what could he wish for more? "A virtuous woman is above rubies."

Then there was Miss Toomey, the new authoress, who was quite the rage that season, although she had sprung from nowhere, because she wrote such delightful Irish stories and told such deliciously wicked anecdotes.

Her friends used to forget to add that she was also an adept at telling deliciously wicked lies, and, in true Hibernian fashion, never said the same thing behind your back that she did to your face, but went from house to house, setting the dearest friends against each other, and leaving the trail of

the serpent behind her wherever she went.

Miss Toomey spared neither age nor sex, neither friend nor foe. She flattered them, made use of them, lived upon them, whilst it suited her to do so, and—always under promise of the strictest secrecy—exaggerated their faults, showed up their weaknesses, and repeated ill-natured things that they had never said, until their greatest intimates began to wonder if they could possibly have been mistaken in them.

She came of a nation that are not remarkable for the strictness of their probity nor the strength of their affections, but she was amusing, if false, and the time for her deposition had not yet come. These three ladies were clustered together in a corner of Mrs. Elliot's drawing-room, sipping chocolate, and pulling Lady Sidney Carleton's character to pieces in a manner worthy of their own strict virtue and sense of Christian duty.

"The way in which she goes on, my dear,"

said Lady Selina, an angular, acidulated-looking woman of middle age, with a red nose, "is perfectly disgraceful. I saw her myself at the opera last night, with Lord Bampton and half a dozen other young men in her box; and she was dressed in the most absurd manner. You would have thought she had just come from Court—cream-coloured satin, trimmed with point lace, cut scandalously low, neck and arms covered with diamonds, and a huge fan of scarlet feathers. Could be seen from one end of the house to the other."

"Oh, that is just what she wanted, of course," tittered Mrs. Onyx Grey; "those sort of women always covet publicity. Fancy her going to a place like Covent Garden with a lot of men in attendance on her. Why, if my husband heard of it he would never allow me to speak to her again."

Yes, only fancy, Mrs. Onyx Grey—six men leaning over her chair at the opera, and you would never think of admitting more

than one at a time to your drawing-room. What a difference between the two of you! No wonder the Reverend Onyx would not encourage your acquaintance.

"And I hear the Carletons are on the worst possible terms with each other, too," interposed Miss Toomey, in a powerful brogue. "They say the scenes that take place between them are something horrible."

"How disgraceful! how scandalous!" murmured Lady Selina, with a convenient loss of memory as to how she had broken open her husband's head with the decanter in days gone by.

"But what can you expect when a girl marries a man for whom she cares nothing?" sighed the virtuous Mrs. Grey. "Lord Sidney goes nowhere with his wife; his absence is remarked by everyone."

"Well, I've been told," said Miss Toomey, "but, mind, this is in the strictest confidence, and you mustn't even ask who was my informant, for I make a point of never

giving up a name—but I was told, and on excellent authority, that Lady Sidney won't *allow* her husband to accompany her anywhere, and it was one of the conditions on which she married him."

"Dear me, how strange!" said Lady Selina; "there must be a reason for that. There must be someone else. I wonder who it is."

"Dear Lady Selina," said Mrs. Onyx Grey, insinuatingly, "*do* you quite believe that story of a former marriage?"

"I don't know, I'm sure, my dear, but it was very mysterious, wasn't it? Anyway, she left home—there is no doubt of that."

"And remained away for a month," exclaimed Miss Toomey, eagerly, "so that if it *wasn't* a marriage——"

"The Capels declare it *was*, of course, but what else could they do? And no one had any proofs of it, you know."

"Well, *I* was never fool enough to believe it," said Mrs. Onyx Grey, with a toss of the

head, “and the girl’s behaviour now is just on a par with what has gone before. She is as brazen as brass. I should like to have a thousand pounds depending on the odds that the Frenchman, whoever he was, that she ran away with for a month, is kicking his heels about town at the present moment.”

“Only *fancy!*” cried Miss Toomey, with a deep-drawn breath of delight at the scandal.

Lady Selina wagged her skinny neck to and fro.

“Ah, well, I don’t say all I think, but if there is not a fresh scandal about that young lady before the season is over I shall be very much mistaken. But I never liked any of those Capels. The mother is a vain, underbred woman, and as for the father, the tales one hears about him are quite shocking.”

“As for that, they say the girl’s marriage with Lord Sidney Carleton was made up in payment of some enormous sum of money that Mr. Capel had lost to him at cards.

What a degrading idea! She was actually sold to him for so many pounds.”

“Well, I am afraid he has got a sorry bargain, whatever the price. Anybody could see he was afraid to let her out in society, by the way he kept her down in the country all last year.”

“And the sequel has proved him to be right, Lady Selina. What the girls of the present day are made of I cannot imagine; they really seem to have no decency left.”

Mrs. Elliot, who kept moving about her drawing-room, first talking to one group of friends and then to another, had ears as sharp as a needle, and it was not long before some fragments of the conversation just related attracted her attention.

Now, she was not only a friend outwardly to Alda Carleton—she was not like Lady Selina Oldham, nor Mrs. Onyx Grey, nor Miss Toomey, who all fawned on her ladyship to her face, and spit at her behind her back—but a true and sincere woman, bold as

a lion to defend those she cared for, and never backward to speak the truth, so that the ladies alluded to were rather startled when she exclaimed, in a voice loud enough to be heard by everybody in the room :

"Lady Selina Oldham, I do not know if you are aware that you are speaking of a great friend of mine. I admire and esteem Lady Sidney Carleton above any woman of my acquaintance, and I must beg, if you have anything to say against her, that you will reserve it until you have left my house."

A great hush immediately fell upon the female portion of the assembly. Nothing so utterly confounds and silences the scandal-monger as the brave, out-spoken remonstrance of a fearless spirit. Lady Selina began to stammer out some sort of apology, but her excuses were cut short by the servant throwing open the door and announcing the very person whose character she had just been so vigorously taking away.





## CHAPTER IV.

“COME AND DRIVE IN THE PARK WITH ME,  
SIDNEY.”

ALDA entered the room with a grace and dignity that struck every male beholder there with admiration and every female with envy. She was attired, moreover, in some marvellous combination of black satin and lace, and yellow roses fresh from the hands of a Bond Street milliner, and looked a type of fashion, as she did of beauty. Mrs. Elliot saluted her eagerly and impressively. She was anxious to let everyone see how loyal and true she was to her friend, and Alda returned her greeting with equal fervour.

"I am so sorry to be late, Nellie," she said, in answer to the hostess's remonstrance on her tardy appearance, "but I had an appointment on the opposite side of the Gardens this afternoon, and did not think I should be kept so long."

At these words Lady Selina glanced at Mrs. Onyx Grey, who elevated her pencilled (Rimmel-pencilled) eyebrows in reply. The glance said, "You hear that! An appointment! What did I say?" And the eyebrows answered, "Of course—I perfectly understand—the Frenchman."

"Better late than never," was Mrs. Elliot's cheerful rejoinder; "still, I wish you had been here sooner, Alda. You would have enlivened us a little, perhaps. We have been reduced to such a pitch of dulness that, in lieu of something more interesting, we have been compelled to pull each other's characters to pieces."

"I thought that was the legitimate pur-

pose for which you met," replied Alda, laughing.

At this juncture, Lady Selina Oldham and Mrs. Onyx Grey found that it was time to leave. They were not quite sure into what dilemma the tongue of their outspoken hostess might not betray them.

"I think, Mrs. Elliot, if you will permit us, we will now say good-bye. It struck five some time ago."

"Oh, don't let the clock frighten you away. However, there is not much more to stay for, is there? Lady Sidney's entrance has put an effectual stop to our pleasant conversation."

"Why, what were you talking about?" inquired Alda, as the ladies in question glided uneasily from the room.

"Wait till these people have gone and I will tell you," whispered the other in reply.

Alda did wait, and a little curiously, pulling the blossoms from Mrs. Elliot's stands of hothouse flowers, and bewildering an infatu-

ated young man with an occasional glance from her hazel eyes as the guests filed one by one from the apartment, and left her at last alone with her hostess.

"And now, what is it all about?" she inquired, as she threw herself upon a low couch by Mrs. Elliot's side, and placed one of her hands confidently upon her lap.

The little widow took the slender hand in both her own and pressed it affectionately. She really loved the sweet face that was looking up in hers with such a feverish, anxious expression on its beautiful features.

"First tell me, dear Alda, about yourself, You do not look well. Where have you been the last few days?"

"Everywhere under the sun, Nellie, and not to a single place I care about. These private theatricals are my last craze, you know, and all my mornings have been engaged in rehearsing. We are going to play the burlesque of the 'Lady of Lyons,' and I have got the

most delightful dress that you ever saw for *Pauline*."

"And who is to be your *Claude*?"

At that name Lady Sidney gave a sudden gasping sigh. Then she answered, in a low voice—

"Lord Bampton."

"Indeed! Can he act or sing?"

"Neither, in my opinion. But we play for a charity, you know, so that does not signify in the least. It is only his name they want."

"I see. It must be quite worth a guinea a stall. And what part does Lord Sidney take in the burlesque?"

"My husband! You are joking, Nellie. As if he would appear on a public stage with a lot of young men like Lord Bampton and Captain Annesley."

"If he does not I don't think you should, Alda."

"You are not in earnest, surely?"

"I am."

"But, my dear Nellie," exclaimed the girl, in a tone of remonstrance, "at that rate I should go nowhere. Sidney won't stir out of the house. He seems to have taken the greatest hatred to balls, and theatres, and public assemblies of all kinds, and I can scarcely persuade him even to drive out with me. It is very awkward occasionally, I can assure you, for there are some places to which mamma says I really must not go alone, and she is not always asked at the same time. However, I am married, you see, and must learn to *chaperone* myself."

"Yes, you are married, Alda, but you are only just one and twenty, and you are *very very* pretty, my dear—you don't mind a woman telling you a truth like that—and the world will be very ill-natured to you if you are seen so much in public without your husband."

Alda's fair cheeks flushed to crimson.

"Oh, I suppose that is what made you speak to those two cats as you did when I

entered the room. They had been discussing my actions, had they? But let them do it, Nellie. Who cares a rush for the opinion of women like Lady Selina Oldham or Mrs. Onyx Grey? Everybody knows they are as bad as they dare to be."

"True, dear; but unfortunately lies gain more credence in this world than truth, and if you give such women cause to scandalise you, very few people will stop to consider if they have any authority for what they say or not."

"But it is not my fault, Nellie, if Lord Sidney refuses to go into public with me. You have no idea how strangely altered he is of late. He was well enough down in the country, but since he has come to town, even papa and mamma cannot understand him. He is absurdly jealous of me. I dare not let a man turn over the leaves of my music in my own house, and yet nine times out of ten it is impossible to make my husband accompany me when I go out. I have known

him dress for a ball, and at the last moment, when the carriage was at the door, he changed his mind and refused to go. He is so very queer. I really think sometimes he must be mad."

"Perhaps you do not use sufficient persuasion to induce him to accompany you, Alda?"

"Oh, *I* am not going to beg and pray of him to do it. The less I see of him, the better," replied the girl, with a proud toss of her head.

"How is that?" asked Mrs. Elliot, quietly. "I knew, of course, that you were not in love with your husband when you married him, but I thought you told me he had earned your gratitude for the part he took during the temporary estrangement you had from your parents."

"So I was grateful to him at first," said Alda, with a suspicious faltering in her voice. "I was happy enough whilst he let me live in peace at Mabyn Fields, and follow my own



employments and have my own thoughts; but now—oh, it is all quite different, and I am never at ease except when I am out of his presence, and rushing about after something to divert my mind.”

“Alda, darling,” said Mrs. Elliot, as she pressed a kiss upon the fair, frowning forehead, “you are not at ease, even with the distraction you speak of. Tell me the truth, dear. Confide your trouble to me—you know that I will hold it sacred—and let me see if I can be of any use to you in your difficulty.”

“What have I to confide?” replied the girl, in a hard voice. “All the world knows my history. It has been made too public already. There is nothing left to tell anyone.”

“You are mistaken there, Alda. All the world does *not* know it, and they put what construction they please upon your actions. You profess to scorn the mischief that may be done you by the tongues of such women

as Lady Selina Oldham or Mrs. Onyx Grey; but, vile as they are, they will always secure listeners. I do not wish to wound you, but I must put you on your guard. I overheard them telling each other this afternoon, that there must be some reason for Lord Sidney allowing you to go about so much alone, and their belief was that you prevented his accompanying you because there was someone you liked better."

"And so far they are right," exclaimed Alda; "there *is* someone I like better."

Mrs. Elliot clasped her hands in dismay.

"Oh, Alda! not Lord Bampton?"

Her surmise was answered by a derisive laugh.

"Lord Bampton! No, Nellie; credit me with better taste. I could not endure his lordship in the light of a lover—off the stage."

"Then who is it? Oh, my dear girl, do confide in me! I can make allowance for all your trials and temptations. I know how

your poor young heart bled and suffered in the bygone time, and the sympathy of a friend of your own age may be very sweet and consolatory in the present, but it mustn't go further than that, Alda ; it must never go further, for the sake of the husband who loves and trusts you, and the parents who look to you to repay them now for the disappointment they suffered in your first marriage."

Mrs. Elliot's eloquence was cut short by a proceeding as unexpected as it was distressing. Alda had flung herself upon her knees and buried her face in her friend's lap, sobbing as if her heart would break.

"Can't you understand?" she said, convulsively. "Have you so little idea of what I felt, that you cannot guess that the reason I run about like this, the reason I allow myself no time to think or feel that I hate Lord Sidney's very presence since he has insulted my dead love, is because I can *never, never* forget my murdered Claude, and the miser-

able circumstances under which we were separated?"

At this announcement the little widow was completely taken by surprise. She had sympathised at the time, naturally, in her friend's bereavement, but they had never discussed the subject together, and youth is elastic, and Mrs. Elliot, judging Alda by herself, had quite imagined she was cured of her grief for her first husband's death. Besides, was she not married again, and mixing in every scene of gaiety in London, as happy and thoughtless, to all appearance, as the most careless there; the admired and envied of those who saw her, surrounded by a train of followers, and glittering with the gems her husband's wealth had hung upon her? Yet here she was at Mrs. Elliot's feet, crying her heart out like a very schoolgirl, for the sake of an obscure young artist who had been dead and buried for the last two years.

To the woman of the world such constancy came almost as a revelation.

“ Oh, my poor girl,” she exclaimed, as her own tears began to flow and mingle with those of Lady Sidney Carleton, “ I had no idea that you still thought of it like this. Is it possible that you have not yet forgotten that unhappy event ?”

“ *Forgotten !*” cried Alda, as she raised her face from Mrs. Elliot’s lap. “ You never knew him, or you would not ask if I had *for-gotten*. Why, his face haunts me day and night. Wherever I go, whatever I do, I see his dear eyes fixed on mine as I saw them last—oh, heaven—in anger !”

“ Poor child, what must you not have suffered during these last two years ?”

“ Yes, Nellie, I *have* suffered, but never so much as now. Let me tell you all about it,” she continued, as she re-seated herself and dried her tears. “ It will do me good to feel I have a friend in whom I can confide. When Lord Sidney asked me to be his wife, I told him the truth—that I felt and I believed that I never should be able to love

another man as I had loved Claude de Beriot. I told him frankly that I thought of him day and night—that till the grave closed over me also, I should never forgive myself for the fact that the last words I exchanged with my dear dead husband were those of anger, and that he must not expect me ever to be otherwise than a sad and broken-hearted woman. Nellie, he agreed to everything I said. Perhaps he did not believe me, or he thought that I deceived myself, but he gave me a solemn promise that I should do just as I pleased in the matter, and he would be content to fill the lower place in my affections. One of my conditions was that I should live in the country, and not be asked to put aside my mourning for my darling until the usual time had expired. Well, we were married. It wasn't a marriage—you understand what I mean, Nellie—I became Lord Sidney's wife because he had done so much for me and *him* at that bitter time, and I had no other means by which to show my grati-

tude to him, but I have never been anything, and I *shall* never be anything but my Claude's unhappy widow till my life's end. Oh, Nellie, if you had only known him ; if you could have seen his beautiful face and heard his ringing, boyish laugh, you would be able to understand what I feel at the knowledge that I shall never look upon him again."

Mrs. Elliot regarded the young creature about whom Fate seemed to have weaved so dire a web of misfortune, rocking herself backwards and forwards in the attempt to stem the torrent of her grief, with supreme pity.

"My poor Alda, this is a terrible story to have to tell of yourself. But why, then, did you leave Mabyn Fields ? You led a peaceful life there, I suppose, if nothing else ?"

"That is what I cannot tell you, Nellie. I was as contented there as it is possible for me to be now. I had my innocent country amusements, and plenty of liberty to

indulge my thoughts, for when one has a heavy grief to carry decently in public, one *must* have a moment now and then in private to look it in the face and battle with it. Oh, it was very peaceful there at first! I used to wander in the park and shrubberies all alone, and think of my darling for hours, and try to persuade myself that he could see my sorrow and had forgiven me. But all of a sudden, one day Sidney walked into my room, and told me he wouldn't stand any more of my nonsense and moping, and we were to live in town for the future. And he dared to destroy," she continued, with flashing eyes, "the only remembrance I possessed of my Claude's face, and he put a devil into me at that moment that he will find it very difficult to exorcise again."

"Alda, Alda, don't be too hard upon him. Jealousy, remember, is the offspring of love."

"There was no love in what he did that day, Nellie," replied the girl, "or, if there



was, he went the wrong way to show it. He abused my dead husband to my face; he called him names; he said I should be ashamed to acknowledge my love for him, and I told him I would never forgive him for what he said, and *I never will*. Are you surprised now," she went on, rapidly, "that I run about from pillar to post, anywhere, with anybody, so that I can get out of the sound of Lord Sidney's voice sneering at me for looking pale, or sad, or languid? Oh, you should hear him sneer, Nellie!—you should hear him ask me whether my thoughts have gone travelling to Italy or hell, and you would wonder why I have not taken up the nearest missile and brained him on the spot. Don't ask me to frequent his society more than I do. If you are my friend, you will keep me out of his sight as much as possible, or there will be a second tragedy in the family. I used to think he was a well-meaning man, and that all the fault of our want of cordiality lay with me; but I have learned

to believe that he is one of the worst of men, and only married me that he might torture me to death."

Mrs. Elliot was not only a woman of the world. She was an intelligent observer of human nature. She knew nothing of the case before her, except what had been related by her friend; and though, even during that brief summary, she had formed her opinions, she felt she should spoil her cause by owning them. Her object was to induce Alda to be seen more with her husband, and to that end she must neither abuse nor defend him. She took, therefore, an entirely opposite course.

"You are too strong and too brave, dear Alda, to allow Lord Sidney or anyone to do that. And you should be too strong also to allow him to neglect his duty. For it is his duty to protect you by his presence from the scandal of ill-natured tongues. Don't you see that it is not only your own name of which you should be careful."

"I care nothing for his," retorted the girl,

bitterly, "nor for what the world may say of it."

"But you care for Claude de Beriot's?"

Alda's lovely face looked up, startled, into hers.

"For Claude's! Yes, of course. But how can my present conduct affect him?"

"By affecting his memory. You would not like to hear it surmised that you had never cared for him, or you would not have forgotten him so soon."

"People must think what they choose. The mere fact of my second marriage must have made them say already that I had found out the first to be a mistake."

"Not necessarily so. But they will judge your past by your present; and if you seem to live on bad terms with Lord Sidney Carleton, they will say you did just the same with Monsieur de Beriot."

"Nellie, what would you have me do?" asked Alda.

"I would have you keep closer to Lord

Sidney's side. He is sure to be flattered by the attention."

"Our occupations are so different."

"Then draw them closer. Where is he this afternoon?"

"At his club, I suppose. He goes there every day after luncheon."

"Why don't you call for him in the carriage and drive him home?"

"It will look so strange, won't it? I have never driven up to the club door."

"Nonsense! Heaps of wives do it every day. Take my advice, Alda. Go and call for Lord Sidney now, and take a drive round the Park before you go home to dinner. Everybody will be there at this time."

Alda rose slowly to her feet. The hint about Claude de Beriot's name had evidently taken effect.

"Well, I will try it," she said, with a sigh.

Her friend kissed her, and called her a good child, and watched her drive away with

a strong hope that she had given her mind an impetus in the right direction.

The servants looked astonished when they received the order to drive to the Patrician Club, and Lord Sidney Carleton looked still more astonished when he was told that his wife's carriage was waiting for him at the door.

He walked stiffly down the steps, however, to learn her pleasure, though without the least notion that it lay in so unusual a direction.

"I want you to come and drive in the Park with me, Sidney," she said, hurriedly, as he looked in at the carriage window. "It is a lovely evening, and there is plenty of time before dinner."

"In the Park!" he echoed. "Cannot you go by yourself?"

"Certainly, if you don't wish to accompany me. But we are so seldom seen together, and really, Sidney," she added, with a nervous laugh that was intended to be gay,

"people will begin to think we are divorced if I always appear in public alone."

"I shall be most happy to go with you," he replied, gravely, as he entered the carriage.

But the drive was not a lively one. Alda's spirits still bore traces of the emotion she had passed through, and Lord Sidney was wondering what new freak she had taken into her head in asking him to drive with her.

As their carriage entered the Park, and his wife was kept constantly employed in returning the salutations of her acquaintances on either side, he became moody, and asked her abruptly why she had chosen so public a place in which to exhibit him to her friends.

"Because people are beginning to talk about our always being seen apart, Sidney, and it was on purpose to try and stop the scandal that I asked you to come here with me to-day."

"So I am to be dragged away from my own pleasures to serve your politics, Lady

Sidney," he answered, in a tone of annoyance. "Well, you must make the most of my company, for I don't think I shall be persuaded into playing the fool for you a second time."

He shrunk back into his own corner of the carriage as he spoke, and took no further notice of the people they passed.

What was the use, thought Alda, of showing off a husband in such an unsociable disposition? She had far better have left him to the imagination of her friends.

As they reached the end of the Row, therefore, she directed the coachman to drive home through Kensington.

She refused to subject herself a second time to the mortification of letting her acquaintances see that Lord Sidney could sit by her side and be as sulky as a bear.

The vehicle was rolling on its destination, and Alda was occupied in her own sad thoughts, when she was suddenly and unpleasantly recalled to a sense of her position

by Lord Sidney grasping her arm so violently as to cause her pain.

Turning to remonstrate with his roughness, she perceived that his face had become ashen pale, and his features were working in a distorted fashion.

"Good heavens, what is the matter?" she exclaimed, quickly, as she looked through the carriage window.

Her husband made a feeble effort to raise his arm, as though to deter her, but not before she had distinguished in the moving crowd that congregated about Hyde Park Corner the figure of—*Paul de Beriot!*





## CHAPTER V.

“HE FRIGHTENS ME,” SAID THE GIRL.

YES, it was undoubtedly Paul. There could be no mistake about that. Even in the moment during which her eyes rested on him, Alda recognized the graceful figure—grown several inches taller in the lapse of two years—the waving hair, with dash of sunlight on it, the handsome features, so like those of her beloved Claude—that had belonged to the young poet brother who had been so devoted to her during the brief term of her first married life. Her natural impulse was to speak to him. She forgot the circumstances under which they had

parted; she lost sight of Madame de Beriot's anger and malice, of Paul's probable suspicions, and she ignored Lord Sidney's evident desire to prevent recognition between them.

All she thought of was that she saw Claude's brother again, that a link between the colourless present and the bright and happy past was suddenly presented before her, and she had called out the name of “*Paul!*” before she knew that it was on her tongue.

The young man did not hear her voice; he was elbowing his way, quietly but determinately, through the crowd, evidently bent upon some business, and the next thing Alda did was to reach out her hand to the check-string; but by this time Lord Sidney had sufficiently recovered himself to lay a deterrent grasp upon her arm.

“What do you do that for?” she said, somewhat sharply. “It is Paul de Beriot, and I must speak to him.”

“No—no!” gasped her husband, in a husky

voice, "be quiet! What are you thinking of? You have gone mad!"

Saying which, he pulled down the silken blind on that side of the carriage whence they had seen Paul de Beriot, and the vehicle rolled on rapidly, and the opportunity to stop or recognize him was past. Alda was very much annoyed. The idea of speaking to her brother-in-law again had excited her to an unusual degree, and she was proportionately disappointed at the result.

"Lord Sidney," she said, haughtily, "I shall be obliged by your giving me an explanation of your conduct. I wish to know by what right you interfere between me and my friends in this unwarrantable manner?"

Lord Sidney was still shivering, as if he had received a mortal fright.

"Your friends!" he ejaculated. "No, not your friends. You forget, Alda—you forget. If I were as careless of you as you are of yourself, you would be in a pretty plight—in a pretty plight."

He kept on repeating his words, as though he were not quite sure if he had enunciated them distinctly, and he bent his sinister eyes upon his wife in a suspicious manner the while, as though uncertain how she would receive the excuse he proffered her.

The spirit in which she received it was one of withering contempt.

"What has Paul de Beriot ever done to make you distrust his being my friend?" she inquired.

"But his mother—you forget her accusations against you, and all the trouble I had; and she may be here herself, for aught we know, and if she saw and recognised you——"

"Let her see and recognise me," replied Alda; "I defy her accusations. It is too late to frighten me with that old nightmare, Lord Sidney. I have long ceased to place any faith in its power to disturb my peace."

"But the assassin was never traced, and should this woman choose to make the matter

public, it would be very disagreeable and annoying to you."

"I thought you came home from Italy with the assurance that he had been found dead in a grove, with the stolen property on his person?"

"Well, yes, such a body was certainly discovered; still, there were no certain proofs that it was that of the murderer, and I should be alarmed beyond measure if I thought Madame de Beriot had come to London for the purpose of insulting and denouncing you."

"I will seek her out, and *dare* her to do so," replied his wife, impetuously. "She knows well enough that I am innocent of what she dared to accuse me, and sooner than be followed and annoyed in private, or made to pay hush money, which would be equivalent to owning I was guilty of the deed, I will meet her in public, and fight the whole matter out before an English bar of justice."

The amber light gleamed so vividly in her eyes as she spoke, and her whole attitude was so defiant, that Lord Sidney felt real alarm at the idea of what she might do or say.

"You mustn't excite yourself in this manner," he expostulated. "My measures were only precautionary. The old woman may not be in England at all, but it would be the height of imprudence were I to permit you to stop and recognise her son."

"I shall speak to whom I choose," replied Alda. "Paul de Beriot is my brother-in-law, and there can be no possible legitimate reason for my not having an interview with him. You have prevented my speaking to him to-day, but the next time we meet I shall do so at any cost."

"You must be crazy!" muttered her husband, in a low voice, as he glared at her from his corner of the carriage.

The subject was not renewed between them; but the following morning, when they

met at the breakfast-table, Alda was astonished to hear Lord Sidney say that he was going back to Mabyn Fields. It was the beginning of July. The season was at its greatest height, for the votaries of fashion had well warmed to their work, and having but a month left in which to enjoy themselves, were making the most of their time.

Engagements had never been more plentiful than they were at that moment, and Alda was pledged to attend picnics, or garden parties, or private theatricals, every day for the next four weeks. Her husband's announcement, therefore, took her so completely by surprise, that at first she refused to believe it.

"Going back to Mabyn Fields!" she echoed. "What, before the season is over? What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say, Lady Sidney. I am not at all well. I passed a very restless night, and feel excessively fatigued this morning. I am convinced that I require

more quiet and fresh air than I can procure in London; and I intend, therefore, to seek them elsewhere. We shall go back to Mabyn Fields to-morrow."

"You can go, of course, if you like," replied Alda, indifferently; "but it is impossible *I* can accompany you. Lady Vernon's theatricals are to come off next week, and Mrs. Bosanquet's the week after, beside a host of other things. I *must* stay in town till the close of the season."

But Lord Sidney was in one of his evil moods, and would not be thwarted. He had seen too much rebellion in his wife's manner the day before to render it safe to leave her in London by herself. Besides, he had his own reasons for desiring her to quit it.

"That is quite out of the question," he said; but he said it uneasily, for he guessed it would provoke a storm. "I am not particular about going to Mabyn Fields. A tour in the Highlands, or a visit to the English lakes, might amuse you better; but I have



quite made up my mind that we leave town to-morrow."

"And I have quite made up my mind that I shall do no such thing," replied the girl, hotly.

"And what reasons have you to adduce for this threat of disobedience?" demanded Lord Sidney.

"I have already stated my reasons. I have made engagements that I cannot break. But if that were not the case, I should still refuse to accompany you. You dragged me from my country home, and forced me to London against my will. You shall not force me back again in the same manner."

"A wife's duty is to go wherever her husband may order her, particularly when it is for the benefit of his health," said Lord Sidney.

"Let Doctor Alderton assure me that it is necessary for your health that you should immediately quit London, and I will go with you," replied Alda, to these words.

"Nevertheless, we start for Mabyn Fields to-morrow," said her husband, in a dogged tone.

He had guessed intuitively that her principal reason for refusing to leave town was caused by her desire to find out and communicate with Paul de Beriot, and that was an evil which he was determined to avert at the risk of any amount of contumacy on her part.

And Alda knew that his sudden wish to return to the country had arisen in order to prevent her meeting her brother-in-law again, and was equally resolved to have her own way in the matter. She did not say another word upon the subject, however, but as soon as breakfast was concluded, she ordered the carriage and drove round to her father's house in Berkeley Square.

She found Mr. Capel in his library, and very much surprised by her appearance at so unusual an hour.

“Papa, I must speak to you. It is time that you interfered between Sidney and me. He has just announced his determination to leave town to-morrow, and take me with him. I am engaged every day for the next month, and it is impossible that I can go. Do make him hear reason, and consent, at least, to leave me behind him until the season is concluded.”

Mr. Capel laid down his *Times*, and looked at his beautiful daughter with amazement. He was very proud of her, now that she was filling her proper position in society, and with his pride had been kindled a real affection. The news she brought startled him as much as it had done herself.

“Sidney going to leave London? For what reason, my dear?”

“That is impossible for me to say, papa. He says it is his health; but that is no worse than usual. It is merely a crotchet he has got into his head; but I am not going to be ordered about like a baby, and you must

tell him so. He will listen to you, perhaps, though he refuses to do so to me."

"Lord Sidney is one of my oldest friends, as you know, Alda, and I have never found him unreasonable as yet."

"Not with you, perhaps; but that is quite a different thing. Listen to me, papa," she continued, impatiently. "You know I do not care a snap of the fingers for the man. I married him because you wished me to do so, and out of sheer gratitude for the trouble I thought he had taken on my behalf."

"You *thought*?" echoed Mr. Capel. "Surely, my dear child, he *did* take a great deal of trouble for you throughout that unfortunate affair. I don't think any man could have done more."

"Perhaps not; but his motives were not so disinterested as I believed them at the time. Any way, I paid him for his trouble. Look at me, papa, and say if he was not well paid for taking a couple of journeys to Italy, and putting up a gravestone—if he

ever did put it up—to the memory of my first husband.”

Mr. Capel glanced at her lovely face and figure with parental pride.

“With full measure, pressed down and running over, Alda,” he answered, warmly. “But your marriage with Lord Sidney has had its advantages for you, my child. See the position you hold in society.”

“It is not all roses,” she said, bitterly.

“No marriage is, my dear child. You should have been too sensible to expect an anomaly.”

“But Sidney would make mine a slavery. You know how loath I was to leave Mabyn Fields, and be presented at Court, and go through all the gaieties of the season. I shrunk from the very idea.”

“I remember it well. It was by my advice that Sidney insisted upon your abandoning your hermit life, and I thought how sensible he was to act upon it.”

“Well, I obeyed him, and you, papa,

though sorely against my will. I came to London, and now that I have made friends here, and am overwhelmed with engagements of all sorts, Lord Sidney wants to drag me away again at a moment's notice, and make me the talk of the town. Why, I have promised to dine at Richmond next week with the Duke and Duchess of Landport, and we have an invitation for the Royal garden party at Chiswick, and Lady Vernon's theatricals will be entirely spoiled by my absence, for I play both the principal characters. And I heard the other day, through Colonel Edgecombe, who is one of the gentlemen-at-arms, you know, that there is a chance of my being asked to take a part in the *tableaux vivants* at Marlborough House. How can I disappoint all these people, and break my promises just because Sidney takes a fancy to go back to Mabyn Fields? It is absurd to expect me to do so! Why did he ever insist upon my appearing in London, if he was averse to my creating a sensation here? He

ought to be proud of people admiring me, but I believe he is just the reverse, and the more I go into public, the more he insists upon remaining at home. Oh, papa, I really do believe he is mad."

Mr. Capel took no notice of his daughter's last remark. But he was quite ready to adopt her view of the subject under discussion.

"My dear child, you are perfectly right. It is impossible that, under the circumstances, you can leave London until the season is over. Why, an apparent slight at Marlborough House would ruin you for ever. And the Duke and Duchess of Landport, too, are only next door to royalty in their influence upon the fashionable world. Oh, it is not to be thought of. I must speak to Sidney about it at once. He surely will hear reason from my lips. And if he is bent upon a change for himself, and does not like to leave so young a woman alone, he must send you to Berkeley Square. Under the pro-

tection of your parents you surely will be safe. But," he added, playfully, as he tapped his daughter's rose-tinted cheeks, "you seem to have taken wonderfully well to your dissipation, Miss Alda. Who would have thought to hear the young lady who was so vehemently opposed to passing a season in town pleading, as you have done just now, against leaving it again? What is the attraction, eh?"

All the glow faded from Alda's beautiful face.

"The attraction of distraction," she said, in a low voice; and then she added, hurriedly, "Oh, father, keep me from being alone with him, for God's sake! You don't know how I fear him."

At these words Mr. Capel looked and felt considerably shocked.

He loved his child, and he had a regard for his friend, and though he had not much faith in happy marriages, he had hoped they got on as well together as most people, but



Alda's voice and manner undeceived him. They were expressive of genuine dislike.

"My dear girl, you mustn't speak to me like that. I can't allow it. I will do all I can for you in this little affair, but I will not hear one word against your husband. He is better than the majority, take my word for it, and, after all, what has he done that you should use such forcible language concerning him?"

"He frightens me," said the girl, in the same nervous, hurried manner. "He has such strange moods and fits, unlike any I have ever seen before. And then I hear him muttering all sorts of things in his sleep, and I lie awake and listen to him till my blood runs cold. And why is he so unsociable and so reserved, papa? Isn't it odd that, amongst our large circle of acquaintances, he should have no intimate friend but yourself? Why do the members of his own family never come and see us? Last week, when I was driving in the Park with Lady

Vernon, we passed a very grand-looking personage in a carriage, and when I asked her who it was, she would not believe but that I was in jest. 'Why, my dear Lady Sidney,' she said, 'that is your own sister-in-law, the Marchioness of Breadfort. You don't mean to tell me that she has never called upon you!' Just fancy, papa, how silly I looked! And then Sidney's sister, Lady Elizabeth Townshend, lives almost next door to us in Portland Place, and yet we have never met. What has the man done that none of his own people will associate with him?"

Mr. Capel looked very grave.

"Nothing, Alda — nothing, upon my honour, or you never should have married him! But Sidney's was always a strange and reserved disposition, and his brothers and sisters have gradually ceased to take any notice of him. It is unfortunate, for your sake, and I did hope they would at least

have called upon you, but I suppose the old prejudice is too strong."

"Don't be sorry for me, papa, for if they are anything like their brother, the less I see of them the better. Only get me leave to remain in London till the close of the season, and I shall be everlastingly grateful to you. I would not be left alone with Sidney now in the country for anything. But mamma has promised to come and stay with me at Mabyn Fields as soon as you start for the moors."

Lord Sidney Carleton had not thought that his wife would immediately consult her parents on the subject of their proposed departure. He was, therefore, considerably surprised by the entrance of Mr. Capel at luncheon-time, Alda having remained in Berkeley Square to bear her mother company.

"Look here, Sid," said his friend, going straight to the point, "you must give up this idea of taking Alda away from London.

You will ruin the child's prospects altogether if you make her break faith with such people as the Landports and the Vernons, and you will do your own character no good by the way in which you will set talking that determined little tongue of hers."

"Oh, so she has been complaining of me at head-quarters, has she?" replied Lord Sidney, uneasily. "And you have listened to her, Capel? I don't call that a friendly act on your part."

"I have never been otherwise than a friend to you, Sidney, and never more so than now. Alda is a very spirited girl, and you can hardly expect her to stand being taken away in the midst of a London season, without a single good reason being given for it. Besides, it would set the whole of your friends talking of you, and create a perfect scandal."

"My health is evidently not considered of the slightest consequence. I told your

daughter plainly that I was suffering from want of fresh air."

"It is not bad enough to make you compel your wife to give up a month's engagements at a moment's notice. But I have a proposal to make to you on that subject, Sidney. Leave Alda with us, and go where you choose until she is at liberty to join you."

"I shall do no such thing."

"I think it would be advisable for more than one reason. The girl complains of your having alarmed her at night by being restless and muttering in your sleep; that betokens an overtaxed brain, and for both your sakes, therefore, I should consider a little separation and quiet advisable."

Lord Sidney looked up, startled and anxious.

"What is that you say? Talking in my sleep? I don't believe it. It is a lie by which to try and get rid of me."

"My daughter has not been in the habit of telling lies," returned Mr. Capel, quietly.

"I think her fault has lain rather on the other side—of being too free with the truth. But she certainly complained of what I have told you."

"What else did she say?" demanded Lord Sidney, eagerly.

"Nothing but what I have already repeated—that it is impossible for her to leave town at present, and that she does not wish to go into the country. Therefore, why not arrange to leave her in Berkeley Square and take a little change by yourself, if that is what your doctor advises you to do?"

"If you are all going to make such a fuss about it, I shall remain in London," grumbled his lordship; "but I do not intend to separate from Lady Sidney now or at any other time."

"Who would desire it?" exclaimed Mr. Capel, delighted at having gained his point. "Of course, it is far better that Alda should have the benefit of your presence and protection. She was in a great state of anxiety

on the subject when she came to me this morning, poor child, but I told her that I was sure all that was required was to put the matter before you in a proper light. Young people do not always explain themselves as we elders have the faculty of doing."

"My wife made her wishes known plainly enough," replied Lord Sidney, "though I did not consider myself bound to accede to them. However, as she has secured your interference, I give in. Let us consider it a settled thing, therefore, that I resign my intention of leaving town until the first of August, when I conclude her ladyship will make no further objection to accompany me to Scotland, or wherever we may decide to go."

"I will answer for it that she will not," said Mr. Capel, fervently.

And then they started off to the Patrician together, where their daily appearance in the characters of father and son-in-law never failed

to gain a round of applause from all who compared Lord Sidney's stooping gait and furrowed features with Mr. Capel's handsome face and youthful manners.

Alda did not meet her husband at dinner that day. He remained at his club and dined there, but when she returned from the Opera at midnight, she found him in the dining-room, waiting to receive her.

"Still up, Sidney?" she ejaculated, as he lifted his cadaverous face from his book, and fixed his sinister eyes upon her countenance. "Would it not be better, since you feel less well than usual, to retire to bed a little earlier?"

"I have stayed up for the purpose of saying a few words to you, Lady Sidney," he answered. "I have seen your father, who told me that you had communicated our conversation of this morning to him."

"Quite true," said Alda, as she let her mantle drop from her shoulders, and revealed herself in all her imperial loveliness before.



him. But it had no more effect upon Lord Sidney than if he had been made of stone.

The time was past when his young wife had had power to charm him.

“You had made out your own case, of course, and I had no alternative but to accede to what Mr. Capel asked on your behalf. I have therefore to inform you that—unless something unforeseen occurs to prevent us—we shall remain in London until the usual period arrives for quitting it.”

“I am glad to hear you say that,” replied Alda, quietly, “because it will save a great deal of trouble. At the same time, as I told you before, if Doctor Alderton says your health requires you to go, we *will* go.”

Lord Sidney waved the remark away with a deprecating gesture of the hand.

“The matter is settled,” he said, “and you will oblige me by not opening out any further discussion of it. Having made my decision on the subject known to you, I will now bid you good-night.”

“*Good-night?*” she echoed, with surprise.

“Yes, good-night! Your father further informed me that I have been in the habit of disturbing your rest by my own restlessness, for which I have to beg your pardon. To avoid such a misfortune for the future, however, I have thought it advisable to order the adjoining bedroom to your own to be made ready for my reception. I trust, therefore, that you will now sleep in peace.”

“Thank you. I trust I shall,” replied the girl, with a heightened colour.

His perfect coolness and imperturbability annoyed her beyond measure. She wondered she could have borne his continual presence about her for so long.

“You *have* a most unpleasant habit of talking in your sleep,” she continued. “And have of late kept me awake listening to you. I am glad, therefore, you have taken the initiative in a matter which I should hardly have dared to propose to you myself.”

“What do I say?” exclaimed Lord Sidney, with a sudden look of alarm.

She perceived the look, and read its import.

“All kinds of horrible things,” she answered, with the design of teasing him.

His sallow complexion seemed to turn a livid hue.

“I don’t believe it,” he muttered; “you must be mistaken. How could I say horrible things if I do not have horrible dreams? It is your fancy, Alda. Anything might make a man talk in his sleep — indigestion or over-fatigue or a tired brain. I have many things to tire mine.”

“Doubtless you have, Sidney. I do not wish to deny it. But how does that accord with your restlessness being attributable to my fancy?”

“Well, I shall not disturb you again,” he answered, somewhat incoherently, “for I shall sleep in the next room—in the next room.”

He went upstairs then, still talking to him-

self, and apparently heedless that he had left his young wife in the dining-room. But Alda was equal to the occasion.

She rang the bell, and requested her maid should be sent for to attend her to her dressing-room, where she was in the habit of having her rippling chestnut hair brushed out and arranged for the night. And in a few minutes more they were alone together, the mistress and the maid, with no old gentleman in the adjoining bedchamber to catch a single word that passed between them.



## CHAPTER VI.

“ DO YOU BELIEVE ME GUILTY, OR DO YOU NOT ?”

A DOZEN plans passed through Alda's brain for seeing and speaking to Paul de Beriot, but not one of them was feasible. How should it be? To find an unknown stranger in London, when you are not aware of his address, is like searching for the needle of world-wide celebrity in a stack of hay.

She had encountered the youth at Hyde Park Corner, and he might have migrated from Cheapside. She might sit down upon the spot where they had met, and never see him pass again. His name even would be no clue to his whereabouts, for it was not likely

that he was settled in the metropolis, and the titles of householders only appear in the Directories. Besides, Alda was very loath to mention his name or anything connected with her former marriage to anyone. She was above confiding such details to servants; to ask Lord Sidney's aid was, of course, out of the question, and her father and mother never heard the sound of De Beriot but they looked as if they were going to faint.

Mrs. Elliot was the only creature to whom Alda could tell her wishes on the subject, and the little widow was as unable to suggest a method of realising them as herself. The only hope appeared to both of them to hang upon the slender chance that Alda had of meeting Paul de Beriot in the crowd again. And that, to be of any avail, must necessarily occur when she was without the presence of her husband.

Lord Sidney seemed to guess the machinations that were forming in the mind of his young wife, for from the day that she

had refused to return with him to Mabyn Fields, he scarcely ever left her alone. From having shut himself up from society, he now, to all appearance, became quite gay, which is to say that he accompanied Lady Sidney wherever she went.

It is true that the *habitués* of the opera and theatres only knew of his presence by accident, for he would sit in the back of the box, shielding himself from observation on the plea that the gaslights hurt his eyes. In the same manner he crouched away in a corner of the carriage when they took a drive together, or concealed himself in the furthest card-room when they attended a party. Still, he was there. People could no longer say that the beautiful Lady Sidney Carleton was allowed to wander about town by herself as if she had been a grocer's wife, and Alda found in consequence that half the distraction her life had afforded her was over.

There was only one part of the day in which she felt really free, and that was when

she took an early canter in the Park. She would not wait until the fashionable hour arrived for showing off her horse and her habit in the Row, but preferred to ride before breakfast, when the morning air was fresh and cool, and a long, uninterrupted gallop dispelled many miserable thoughts from her mind, and made her feel stronger to encounter the disagreeables of the day.

In these rides Lord Sidney had not yet even proposed to accompany her. Perhaps he considered them unlikely to be fraught with any danger; perhaps he felt really unequal to rising so early and undertaking so much fatigue. Anyway, Alda's enjoyment in this respect was not interfered with, and, protected by the presence of a middle-aged groom, and sometimes—but very seldom—joined by a friend, she rode up and down the Row, or into the country, every morning for a couple of hours before she greeted her husband at the breakfast-table.

It was on one of these occasions that she



met Paul de Beriot again. She had been having a certain amount of trouble that morning with her horse, which was very fresh and inclined to get the bit between his teeth and make a bolt of it. A sudden outburst on his part of this kind had put a considerable distance between her groom and herself, and Alda was still fighting with the refractory animal when she perceived a young man about to cross her path.

A sudden pull that brought her horse upon his haunches, and the hurried ejaculation, "I beg your pardon!" made the stranger first step backwards to the kerbstone, and then glance up at the lady who had so nearly run over him. One look was sufficient; in that moment they stood revealed to each other, Alda Carleton and Paul de Beriot.

In what other woman could he have recognised those speaking eyes, that rose-leaf complexion, those closely braided coils of sunny hair? What other man's face could have presented to her Claude's features, sur-

mounted by Paul's mournful and poetic expression ?

For a brief space they stared at each other, equally unable to speak, though their breasts were filled with very opposite feelings ; the woman's overflowing with pleasurable excitement ; the man's with a repulsion amounting to horror. Alda was the first to break the ice between them.

"*Paul!* Is it possible? Oh, I have longed so to see you again. What are you doing here?"

But he drew further from her, and did not appear to see the hand that she held out so eagerly towards him.

"Nothing that concerns you," he answered, in a hard tone, when at last he found a voice in which to answer her at all. "Why do you address me? It can lead to no good for either of us."

As Paul spoke thus, the glow of excitement faded from Alda's face. She had forgotten what good reason the boy had for

wishing to avoid her. All she remembered was that the brother of her dead husband did not care to speak to her.

“ Oh, Paul,” she said, mournfully, “ have you so soon forgotten the past ?”

“ *Forgotten it !*” he echoed. “ Is it likely I should have forgotten it, Lady—Lady—I believe I am right in addressing you as Lady Sidney Carleton ?”

“ Yes, that is my name,” she answered, simply.

“ And you can sit there,” he said, scornfully, as he gazed into the imperial face that looked down upon him with such a sweet, sad expression in its eyes, “ you can sit there and tell me quietly that you have married that man, and expect me to shake you by the hand, and congratulate you on the event ?”

“ Oh no,” she exclaimed, “ it is no subject for congratulation, Paul. Indeed, indeed, I am a very miserable girl, and I may truly

say I have never had one happy moment since I saw you last.”

“I am glad to hear it,” he answered, coldly, “for you deserve all the misery your life may bring you.”

“Paul, Paul, you are cruel to me. Remember how young I was, and how circumstances combined to drive me to it.”

“Youth is no excuse for inconstancy or crime, Lady Sidney. You had a loving husband, and you forgot him for the first man who asked you to do so.”

“I have *never* forgotten him !” she cried, vehemently. “Claude was my first and only love, and he will never cease to be so. I love him at this moment as dearly as ever I did, and I think of him and regret him by day and by night.”

“And *you*, Lady Sidney, dare to tell me this ?” said Paul, in an indignant voice.

“Why should I not ? Do you suppose I love the old man because I bear his name ? I tell you, Paul, that when I think of my

lost Claude, I *hate* him, and curse the hour when he persuaded me to resign my freedom in order to become his wife. Oh, Paul, have pity on me! Tell me all about the dear old home in Florence. How I dream of it—the dark olive-groves, the spreading-orange-trees, the rich grass in which we used to wander ankle-deep to gather the wild-flowers which *he* loved so much. And then that last dreadful night, and my poor darling's face. Oh, it comes back to me sometimes until I think that I shall go mad."

"You may well think so, Lady Sidney Carleton. For my own part, I wonder that you are not so in reality."

His expression was so stern, as he stood looking down upon the ground with closed lips and clasped hands, that Alda understood at last that Madame de Beriot's influence must have been at work to make this lad believe her as guilty as she had dared to do herself.

“I see it all,” she cried. “Your mother has set you against me. I have heard of the accusations she has dared to make—nothing has been kept back from my knowledge. But I defy her, Paul, and I will be even with her yet.”

“Your threats are vain,” he answered, “for my poor mother is beyond the reach of all persecution. She died three months ago.”

“Madame de Beriot is dead!” said Alda, noting nothing else in the surprise of the announcement. “And are you all alone, then, Paul, and do you live in London?”

“I am not all alone, Lady Sidney, and I do not live in London,” he answered, curtly. “And now I must beg that you will permit this interview to cease. It would have been more judicious and delicate on your part had you prevented its occurrence.”

“Oh, Paul, don’t say that! You have been listening to lies against me. I am not the guilty creature you imagine.”

“I see what you *are*, Lady Sidney,” he

answered, scornfully. "Facts cannot lie to me. And the honour, the respect I bear to my dear brother prevents my holding any further intercourse with you."

"Try to think more kindly of me. If you only knew how I love and cherish his memory still. Let me see you again, Paul. I cannot stay longer, now, but meet me here to-morrow morning, and I will explain everything to you."

"No, no; I do not wish to hear any of your excuses; I do not wish ever to see your face again. To-morrow my business here will be ended, and I shall return to Italy. Till then I pray I may not cross your path again. Oh, Alda, Alda, what a heaven our lives might have been, and to what a hell your hand has turned them!"

He rushed from her side as he spoke, and she watched him cross the Park and walk rapidly away in the direction of Kensington.

"He thinks I killed him," she murmured to herself, with pallid lips. "That wicked

woman has made him believe—notwithstanding the murderer's body was found—that I struck the fatal blow that deprived my angel of his life. Oh, what can I do to undeceive him? She is dead, and poor Paul is left all alone to bear this heavy burden by himself. No wonder he hates the sight of me! How should I hate the sight of the wretch who killed my Claude! I could not endure it for one moment. I should strangle him where he stood. But to think that Paul suspects me—Paul, who used to wait upon me and admire me so much, and was beginning to love me like a sister! Oh, it is very hard—it is bitterly hard! It makes me feel as if I must drag the whole business to the light, if only to clear my character in his eyes. But Claude knows that I am innocent. You know, my own darling, that I would have died ten thousand deaths to save you one."

She was sitting on her horse thus mournfully soliloquising, whilst she watched the hasty retreat of her young brother-in-law,



when the groom, who had been wondering for the last twenty minutes when she intended to move, respectfully approached to remind her ladyship that it wanted but a quarter to ten.

“And I shall be late for breakfast,” exclaimed Alda, as she waked her slumbering steed with a touch of the whip, and sent him flying homewards at dangerous speed.

Being late for breakfast in Portland Place meant encountering Lord Sidney in a very bad temper, and this morning was no exception to the general rule. He was not slow to observe, also, that his girl-wife had been indulging in an extra amount of emotion over her dressing, and his sarcastic remarks on the circumstance aggravated Alda to tell him the truth.

“If you particularly want to learn the reason that I have red eyes,” she said, as soon as they were alone, “it is because I met my brother-in-law, Paul de Beriot, in the Park this morning, and from some remarks he made I find he is imbued with his mother’s shameful suspicions

concerning my late husband's death. Lord Sidney, I am determined I will not rest under this ban, even in the mind of Paul de Beriot, and you must take measures to clear my character in his eyes.”

“What measures do you expect me to take?” he demanded, with assumed indifference, though Alda could see the piece of toast he held shaking in his hands.

“You must find out my brother-in-law, and compel him either to prove his doubts or to confess himself mistaken. It is wicked to let me lie under so vile an imputation when you know that I am entirely innocent of the horrible deed.”

“I know that you *say* that you are,” replied Lord Sidney, with a peculiar emphasis.

Alda stared at him in amazement.

“Good heavens !” she exclaimed, “do you dare to insinuate that I am *not* ? Was not the body of the assassin discovered, with the trinkets of which he had robbed my poor husband upon it, and were not the police

authorities perfectly satisfied that they had found the guilty man?"

Lord Sidney smiled in a sickly manner at his wife's energetic disclaimer.

"Oh, certainly! The authorities were perfectly satisfied, especially when I had paid them handsomely for their trouble, and told them to search no further. They were *quite* certain *then* that the real criminal was found. The Italian police are not a particularly trustworthy body of officials, and would swear away the characters of their own fathers for the sake of a few pieces of gold."

"What do you intend me to understand by your words?" cried Alda, in the utmost excitement. "Do you mean to tell me that you were *not* satisfied that I had nothing to do with that most cruel murder, and that you actually made the woman whom you suspected of so base a crime your wife?"

"My dear Lady Sidney, had you not better speak in a lower tone of voice, lest the servants should hear you?" replied her hus-

band, with assumed calmness. "As for my overlooking any little previous circumstances in your life in my desire to make you my wife, that is only natural in any man—especially in one who has lived long enough in the world to know that many a so-called crime, committed in a moment of passion, leaves the perpetrator no more guilty in reality than if the blow had failed of its mission."

The beads of moisture stood upon Alda's brow as she heard the malicious and crafty answer given.

Lord Sidney noted the circumstance, and believed that he had accomplished his object of frightening her into submission to his wishes. But he was greatly mistaken.

"I will have the truth from you," she said, in a low, but perfectly distinct voice. "Do you believe me guilty of the murder of Claude de Beriot, or do you not?"

"What else do you expect me to believe? Every circumstance was against you. The

members of his family had but one opinion on the subject, and I had to pay several thousand pounds as hush money in order to prevent the accusation being spread all over Europe."

"I did not ask you what his family thought, nor the sum of money you were obliged to pay. I demanded to know if you yourself believe me to be guilty of that crime."

"Well, if you will press the point, *I do*," replied Lord Sidney; "but at the same time, Alda, there is no need, I hope, to tell you that my protection will always be extended over you, as it is at present. So long as you keep to my side, and avoid the company against which I warn you, you are perfectly safe."

He had expected to see the blood retreat from her face at this solemn answer—to see her fling herself at his feet, or into his arms, as she had done when the first horror of the accusation against her burst on her bewildered

senses, and to hear her promise to do anything, or to go anywhere, so long as he would save her from the malice of her false witnesses. But, to his intense surprise, Alda did nothing of the sort, but stood still in the same place, glaring at him with eyes full of hatred and contempt.

All the devil in her nature—and no woman is worth anything who has not a devil of indignation to call up against injustice, and falsehood, and dishonour—came to the surface as she contemplated the mean creature who had attempted to curb her spirit by a cowardly assertion which he knew to be untrue, and the tigress look blazed into her hazel orbs as she drew her lithe figure to its utmost height, and looked down upon him sitting opposite to her with his face turned away, not daring to meet the scorn which he knew he deserved.

“*You believe it!*” she repeated, slowly. “That is a lie, Lord Sidney, and you know it. But since you dare to profess even to

believe it, I refuse the offer of a protection which must be founded upon fraud. I am innocent, and I am not afraid to court inquiry and explanation. I shall lay the whole matter, therefore, before my father to-day. I shall tell him of Madame de Beriot's accusations, and your credence of them, and I shall beg him at once to have the business sifted to the bottom, and my fame righted in the eyes of the world."

"No, no!" cried Lord Sidney, rising to his feet. "You must not do it! You cannot do it! It would be madness to rake the matter up again."

"I *can* do it, and I *will* do it," replied his wife. "I do not choose to live under the imputation of being a murderer, even in the eyes of Paul de Beriot and yourself, and I am so perfectly well aware of my innocence that I have no fear of any facts coming to light that shall prove detrimental to my cause. Besides, I owe it to *him*. You told me you had traced the assassin, and he was

beyond the reach of justice. You confess now that you lied to me. Therefore the wretch must be still at large, and my Claude's blood is unavenged. But I will find him, if I have to search to the furthest corner of the earth.”

She clenched her delicate hands together as she spoke, and bit her lip and knit her brow.

There was determination in every look and gesture, and Lord Sydney saw that she was in earnest. His terror at the sight was pitiable.

“Alda! Alda!” he pleaded, “you *must* abandon so foolhardy a design. If you tell this secret to your father, he will never forgive you for having concealed it hitherto. And the money I expended to try and clear your name, too—think what contumely the act will bring upon me. They will call it bribery and fraud. And yet I did it for your sake. It was all, all for you, Alda—to pre-



vent the world casting a slur on your reputation. And I made you my wife, too, in spite of everything. I had no fear, you see, whatever they tried to make me believe. Surely I deserve a little consideration at your hands in return? Why should you try to undo all I have done for you? You are safe now. No one will dare to accuse Lady Sidney Carleton of so foul a deed. And the young man will never trouble you either, if you will keep out of his way. And I will find him and send him from England. I will settle an income upon him, if you will only promise to have a little care for yourself and for me, and not publish such a disgrace to the world."

"*You believe I did it,*" said Alda, in a hard, unnatural voice.

"No, no! I do *not*! You aggravated me to say that! How could I believe such a thing of you—so young and innocent! Poor child, did I not do my very best to

shield you? And now you are my wife. Our name is such a high and honoured one! You will have some consideration for that—and for me, Alda, and promise to say nothing of what has passed between us to your father."

She saw the advantage she had gained over her husband, but she would not give in. How could she tell but that he would repeat the falsehood he had just uttered?

And so she played with his fears as an angler plays with a fish, and left him in a pleasing state of uncertainty.

"I can promise nothing, Lord Sidney," she answered, as she prepared to quit the room. "It is impossible to reconcile your present statement with that which went before. I must believe one or the other, and I have not yet made up my mind which. But for the present I prefer to drop the subject, that I may have an opportunity to think over what you have stated by myself."

Saying which, she swept out of the room, leaving Lord Sidney in a condition of abject fear as to what steps she intended to take in the matter.



## CHAPTER VII.

“THE WHOLE HORRID TRUTH BURST UPON HER.”

LORD SIDNEY sat for some time where his wife had left him, holding his head in his palsied hands, and brooding on the determination she had expressed. Her conduct had taken him so completely by surprise that he did not know what to make of it. He had expected to see her frightened and cowed by the recollection of that terrible episode in her life, instead of which she had laughed his fears to scorn, and unhesitatingly proposed to drag the whole affair to the light of day, and let public opinion decide upon her guilt or innocence.

As Lord Sidney Carleton thought of the consequences such a rash proceeding on her part might involve, he cowered in his chair. In fancy, he saw the name which had been esteemed so highly amongst the annals of England's aristocracy dragged in the dirt of a criminal trial, to and heard the thousand tongues that would be ready primed to affirm that they had never expected anything else; and he wondered, as he sat there, whether the possession of this girl had recompensed him for all the trouble, and the humiliation, and the anxiety he had gone through, and was still likely to go through, on her account.

At last, it seemed as if he could not bear the suspense under which he laboured any longer, and he resolved to seek Alda, and, at any cost, to obtain her promise not to reveal the secret they shared between them. But when he rose with that intent and went upstairs, he found that she had disappeared. "Her ladyship," so her maid affirmed, "had

ordered the carriage, and left the house an hour ago."

Overwhelmed with fear lest she should have gone straight with the news to her father, as she had threatened to do, Lord Sidney made all haste to Berkeley Square. But here he learnt that the Capels had neither heard nor seen anything of their daughter since the day before. They observed the pitiable condition of Lord Sidney, however, and commented upon it openly.

Mr. Capel made him sit down in his library, and could hardly be prevented sending for Dr. Alderton to see him on the spot. But Lord Sidney would not be detained beyond a few minutes, and steadfastly refused to have any medical assistance. He was perfectly well, he declared, as with tottering steps he passed through the hall again, and only felt a little shaky after the late hours he had kept lately.

"When an old fellow like me," he said, with an assumption of gaiety, "takes a young

wife to himself, he must pay the penalty of dancing attendance on her at balls and theatres. But I confess I shall be glad to find myself in the quiet of Mabyn Fields again, Capel."

"If Sidney is not going to have another of those attacks," said Mr. Capel to his wife, as the door closed after their antiquated son-in-law, "I am very much mistaken. He looks just as he did before he had that fit in his chambers. Did you observe how drawn his mouth was, and what an anxious, scared expression he had in his eyes? I am sure he is going to be ill, and I have half a mind to send Alderton a hint to give him a call as if by accident, and see what he can do for him."

"What did he want to see Alda for?" demanded Mrs. Capel. "Have they not met this morning?"

"I really cannot tell you. Carleton was most reticent on that point, and I could get nothing out of him. I suppose they have

had a misunderstanding. I am afraid the girl's rather headstrong, and leads poor old Sid a dance. I shall be glad myself when they are once more safe at Mabyn Fields."

Meanwhile Lord Sidney went back to Portland Place; but though the carriage had returned, it had not brought its mistress with it. The servants said they had left her ladyship at some private house in Russell Square, where she went to attend the rehearsals for her amateur theatricals, and had received orders not to wait.

Lord Sidney was shy of obtruding his presence amongst all the gay young people who formed the company, but after the interval of an hour he summoned up courage to follow his wife to the house of her friend, in hopes of procuring an interview with her before she left it. But he was doomed to be again disappointed.

Lady Sidney Carleton had just finished her share of the rehearsal, and quitted the



premises, and the hostess could give her husband no information as to her next destination. There was nothing for him to do but to return home again and await her advent there. But it was late before she came. All through the afternoon and lengthy evening Lord Sidney sat in the same position, brooding over the possible consequences of his wife's wilfulness, and deliberating whether there was any means, since fear had failed, by which he could *compel* her silence, and force her to respect the name which he had given her.

The dinner was served and taken away, and still the lonely man sat there, thinking. At midnight Alda came. She had spent her day innocently enough, but she had spent it with the express purpose of keeping out of her husband's presence. To be supposed capable, under any circumstances, of committing so foul a crime as murder, was death to the pride of a high-spirited woman like Alda Carleton ; but when she took into con-

sideration the fact that it was her husband, and the man who had professed to be her best and truest friend, who had dared to sneer in her face and ask her what else she expected him to believe but that she had taken the life that was dearer to her than her own, she felt as if she could become in reality what he suspected her of being, and kill him on the spot.

As she left his presence that morning, she had experienced such loathing and distaste for it that she had determined never to seek it again, except when she was obliged. She had even made up her mind to demand a separation from Lord Sidney as the price of her silence. But all *that* lay in the future, and she had the present only to act in. So Alda went to her rehearsal, and seemed as gay as the gayest there, and won golden opinions from all the spectators. And then she sought her friend, Mrs. Elliot, in Kensington Gardens Square, and told her she wanted quiet and repose, and begged to be

taken in for the day. Since confidence had been established between these two women, such a request on Lady Sidney's part was nothing out of the common way, and so Nellie Elliot kept her and made much of her, and more than once half extracted the secret that was hovering on her lips. When evening came, they went to the theatre together, and thence Alda entreated her friend to accompany her home to Portland Place.

“Just for one moment, dear,” she urged; “I will not detain you longer if you will but enter the house with me. I have a reason for asking it, Nellie. You know me well enough to be sure I would not trouble you without.”

And her friend did know her well enough, and never even demanded the reason for so unusual a request.

When the ladies entered the house together, Alda's first question was if Lord Sidney were at home.

“His lordship is still in the dining-room,

my lady," replied the footman, as he flung the door of that apartment open.

"Send my maid to me *at once*," was his mistress's rejoinder, as she followed Mrs. Elliot into the presence of her husband.

Lord Sidney was not over-pleased to receive the little widow at that time of night; but courtesy compelled him to be civil to her.

"Did you think I had run off with your wife, Lord Sidney?" she exclaimed, as they shook hands with one another. "I have always half a mind to do so, I can assure you. My home is so lonely, and her presence brightens it so much, that I cannot bear to return to it without her. If she disappears altogether one day, therefore, you will know who is the thief. But for the present, I return her to you safe and sound. We have had a delightful evening together at the Lyceum. Irving surpassed himself to-night, and we have both been crying to our hearts' content. What would women do

if they couldn't cry, Lord Sidney? Our sex has not many advantages over yours, but that is one of them. We find a good cry so refreshing, and I believe you do *not*. Well, well, most things are evenly balanced in this naughty world, and you have your clubs and cigars to make up for it. But they never can entirely compensate to you for not knowing the luxury of 'a good cry.' "

While Mrs. Elliot was rattling on after her own fashion, and Lord Sidney was trying hard to look interested in what she said, Alda's maid, Rosa, had entered the room to take her mistress's cloak and bonnet, and, by her orders, remained in it.

"It's very late, and we mustn't keep you any longer, Nellie," said Alda, with a look that told the little widow that the object for which she had been asked to enter the house was accomplished.

"That's a polite intimation that I may go," replied Mrs. Elliot, laughing. "Good-night, then, Lord Sidney; good-night, my dear

Alda. I shall be at home all to-morrow, if you find nothing better to do than to come and see me again.”

As she fluttered out of the apartment, Lord Sidney was obliged to walk by her side to the door, where her brougham awaited her, and by the time he returned the dining-room was empty. His wife had gone straight upstairs in company with her maid. His long waiting had resulted in nothing more satisfactory than this, and he recognised the reason of it but too well.

Alda had resolved to afford him no opportunity for an explanation. She had not yet made up her mind how she should act.

The wretched man crept up to his own bedchamber, which adjoined that of his wife, and awaited there the moment when she should be once more alone. He heard the voices of both mistress and maid from the dressing-room beyond, though he could not distinguish the words they said. What could they find to do or talk about that should

take them so long a time? It was twenty minutes since they had gone upstairs, and it seemed more like an hour. At last they entered the sleeping chamber. He could hear Alda giving her final orders to Rosa, and directing her not to call her in the morning until she rung the bell, as she was very tired. Then the lights were extinguished, the last good-nights exchanged, and the maid closed the outer door, which was secured by a self-fastening bolt from the inside.

His time had arrived. He would seek his wife's presence now, by the door of communication between their apartments, and, if need be, humble himself before her, confess he was in the wrong, agree to any condition she might require of him, promise anything, do anything, so long as he disabused her mind of the intention of making public her fancied wrongs. He twisted the handle of the door hopefully; he felt so sure of the nobility and generosity of the nature he had to deal with.

*It was locked!* His wife must have anticipated his wishes, and was determined to circumvent them. That locked door seemed to Lord Sidney like the blasting of all his hopes, like a rude negative thrown back to his entreaty, and after one or two attempts to force an entry, he shrunk back to the chair he had quitted and dropped into it with a groan of despair.

If Alda heard the sound she did not respond to it. She lay in her bed with a heart which still burned with indignation at the insult that had been offered her, and her own belief was that she would have refused to unlock that door if Lord Sidney had been dying on the other side of it. She heard him muttering discontentedly to himself as he moved about his room, and rejoiced to think that she was safe from his intrusion.

After awhile all sounds ceased, and the house was wrapped in the quiet of repose; but still Alda lay upon her pillows, painfully



wide awake, with her eyes peering into the darkness, and not the faintest semblance of drowsiness about her. All her troubles came back upon her brain with a distinctness that made her feel as if she were suffering them again, and her heart throbbed and fluttered with excitement as the diorama of her past life unfolded itself before her mental gaze. How she longed to be able to feel sleep creeping over her eyelids and lulling her into forgetfulness! She turned first on one side and then on the other; she tried to think of everything that was most monotonous and soothing; she beat up her lace-trimmed pillows and threw half the coverings off her bed—but still without effect. Slumber was as far from her eyes as ever. At last Alda thought that she would read herself to sleep; so, rising softly, she lit the wax candles that stood upon the toilet-table, threw a white wrapper around her, and, ensconcing herself in an armchair, took up the novel she was engaged upon at the moment, and tried to

interest herself in the fortunes of its heroine. We must presume that the story was better worked out and told than the majority are in the present day. Possibly it was by Mr. Wilkie Collins, who possesses a greater faculty of riveting the attention of his readers than any other novelist of the period. Anyway, it had the power to charm Lady Sidney Carleton from the contemplation of her own troubles, and make her lose count of time and of fatigue. She lounged back in her armchair with the book in her hand, entirely absorbed in the pages she read, till the wax candles had burned down to within an inch or two of their sockets, and the grey dawn was feebly trying to struggle through the red silk blinds and the damask curtains which Rosa had drawn so carefully to exclude the light.

Alda must have been reading for two or three hours, when her attention was diverted from her book by the sound of a hoarse whisper. A very small noise assumes a vast

importance in the extreme silence of the night or early morning, and there was something so sepulchral and unearthly in that which now reached Alda's ears that her blood ran cold to hear it.

Her first thought was, whence did it proceed? It seemed as if one or more voices were whispering just outside her door. Could there be burglars in the house? Both the entrances to her room were locked; but women do not stay to remember such trifles when they are frightened. Alda was both high-couraged and self-possessed. She did not, therefore, scream out in her alarm, but she stood up on her feet and listened eagerly, whilst every tinge of colour forsook her cheek.

A moment's consideration, however, convinced her that the voice proceeded from Lord Sidney's room, also that it had left the vicinity of her door, and was at the other end of the apartment.

What ought she to do? It might be

someone who had entered the house without her hearing any disturbance—she had been so absorbed in her book—and gained access to her husband's room for the purpose of robbery or murder. It might even be his own valet who had a design to plunder his master. Alda had often read and heard of such things.

Her impulse was to ring her bell, but she remembered that would alarm the thief and permit him to escape before the household could be summoned to come to her assistance. She therefore determined to unlock the door between the apartments and confront the intruder herself. Her appearance, if it could not stop robbery, would at least prevent murder.

She must have been a brave girl to contemplate such a step, and without hesitation to act upon it. But she was something more than brave. Alda Carleton was hopeless, and when there is no man for whose sake a woman values her life it becomes

worthless in her own eyes ; so that it was without fear that she turned the key in the lock of the door of communication and threw it open.

She was quite prepared to rush in and exclaim to anyone she might find there :

“How dare you enter this house or attempt to touch the master of it? Drop your plunder and leave the room at once, or there are loaded pistols on the table, and I shall not hesitate to fire on you !”

She entered hastily, full of this high resolve, and she saw there—nobody except the rightful owner of the apartment.

But he was sitting on the side of his bed, and when Alda had convinced herself that he was the only inmate of the room, she directed her attention more particularly to him.

“Sidney,” she exclaimed, under her breath, for there was something unnatural in his appearance that frightened her, “what are you doing there? Why are you out of bed?

I thought someone had broken into the house."

Lord Sidney did not turn his head towards her as she addressed him, nor give any intimation that he had heard her speak. He retained his position on the side of the bed, and muttered some sentences, indistinctly but rapidly, to himself.

"What are you saying?" cried the girl, sharply.

She was angry at having been betrayed, as she thought, into an exhibition of weakness, or interest in her husband's welfare.

Yet Lord Sidney did not lift his head, nor notice her presence in any way.

"Now is the time," he kept on repeating, rapidly, in a husky voice; "now is the time! She is gone—she is gone—and he's asleep—he's asleep!"

"Who is asleep?" exclaimed Alda, impatiently.

She was too inexperienced in such matters to perceive that her husband was asleep, but

when he rose from his seat and tottered towards her with fixed and sightless eyeballs, she thought he must have gone mad, and shut the door in his face, and stood behind it, trembling, with her hand upon the lock. But he did not approach her room nor attempt to enter it, and after awhile, although the talking still continued, Alda felt ashamed of her fear. Something of the truth, too, had flashed into her mind.

“He must be walking and talking in his sleep,” she thought. “I have heard it is a common occurrence when people are not well. How strange!—how curious! I have never seen such a thing in my life before.”

And curiosity prompted her to open the door again and peep into her husband’s chamber.

He was at the other end of it now, busy, apparently, in watching something, and the same words caught her ear—

“He is asleep! It is a chance that may never occur again! And the knives, too—

the knives! Give me one of his own knives to do it with!”

“ *One of his own knives!*” As Alda heard that sentence all the timidity of her woman’s nature deserted her upon the instant.

“ *One of his own knives!*” Where was her fear of this sleepwalker gone to?—where the natural dread engendered by the lonely situation, the time of night, the horrible expression on Lord Sidney’s face, and the far-off, unearthly sound in the tone of his voice? Had there been a hundred men walking in their sleep instead of one, she would have dashed amongst them at that moment, as she dashed into her husband’s room and stood beside him, glowing like a beautiful pythoness, ready to denounce and to consume.

But he neither saw nor heard her. His brain, which had been brooding all day upon one subject only, and had retired to rest at last unsatisfied, was busy forcing his body to reproduce in sleep the actions under the



memory of which the mind still feverishly laboured ; and Lord Sidney's muscles unconsciously obeyed the working of his brain, whilst his wife stood over him like an avenging angel.

"Yes, yes," he muttered, his voice sometimes rising to a hoarse scream, and sometimes sinking so low as to become almost unintelligible ; "better that knife—less risk—less risk ! And then she will be mine—mine—mine !"

He approached the sofa in a crouching attitude as he spoke, and stood behind it, glaring at some invisible object with fixed and bloodshot eyes.

"I wish my hand didn't shake so," he continued, in a harsh whisper. "If I should fail to do it ! The knife is very blunt. But I mustn't stop to think—to think—to think ! Ha !" he screamed, as he contemplated the sofa cushion, "he has moved—he will wake ! He shall not wake—he shall not wake ! *Her* lover—her lover !"

He plunged upon the cushion, striking it two or three times, as though he carried a weapon in his hands, then sunk back exhausted, with the perspiration pouring down his face, and began to cry.

"Don't let Alda know!" he whimpered. "She says she will tell her father, and then they would guess the truth. Yes, madame, yes—it was her, without doubt; but we must hush it up! How much money do you require? I will pay anything—anything—only keep his face away from me! Alda—Alda—it was not I! The police know all about it. Why do you worry me with these foolish questions? Ha!" he recommenced, as he darted to the other side of the room, "it is all a mistake! There he is again! He is alive—he is alive! Give me that knife—give me one of his own knives to do it with!"

As the sleep-walker approached the spot where she stood, Alda flew from his presence

with loathing, and shut and barred the door between them.

She knew everything now. The whole horrid truth had burst upon her. Lord Sidney Carleton was the man who had murdered her first husband, Claude de Beriot.



## CHAPTER VIII.

“NO POWER SHALL INDUCE ME TO RETURN.”

THE girl staggered back into her room, looking and feeling as if she had received a violent blow upon the head. Throughout the various phases of her indifference to and repugnance of the man whose name she bore, she had never given him the credit of committing so terrible a deed as this. But now it all seemed to come back upon her like a revelation from heaven.

His journey to Florence in search of her ; his sudden appearance on the scene of the murder ; the falsehoods he subsequently told of the police authorities having discovered

the body of the criminal, and the cowardly way in which he permitted her to be accused of the deed which his own hand had wrought—all these proofs, crowding one upon another through her brain, made Alda dizzy with surprise, indignation, and horror.

Of one thing alone she seemed certain—that from that hour everything was over between Lord Sidney Carleton and herself. Never again would she touch the hand of—far less dwell under the same roof with—the wretch who had deprived her beloved Claude of his precious life.

How her blood boiled as she remembered the indignities to which she had been subjected under the idea that she was demonstrating a becoming gratitude for all the benefits he had bestowed on her! How her flesh quivered with disgust as she thought that she had been the wife of the man who had deprived her of her greatest joy in life, and who had accepted her tears and thanks as

though they were his due for striking that cowardly blow !

But it was over. With the first gleam of morning light she would denounce him openly as a midnight assassin and a liar. But to whom ? Who would believe her story ?

Would her father and mother, or Lord Sidney's relations, or even Paul de Beriot, who seemed so thoroughly imbued with the conviction of her guilt ?

Lord Sidney himself would, of course, deny the imputation ; and there was no witness to his sleep-walking propensities but herself. Even had there been, would not the medical men attribute them simply to the unconscious action of an over-excited brain, and declare them to have connection only with the thoughts he had laboured under, not the deeds he had done ?

*She* might be thoroughly convinced of his guilt—*she was*—but who would agree with her ? As Alda recognized the difficulties in

her way, she sank back in her seat with a cry of hopelessness.

Her father's old debt of gratitude to Lord Sidney would make him do all he could to hush the matter up; her mother was an incapable weakling, and Paul would only believe she was desirous of shifting the blame from her own shoulders to those of her husband.

Amidst the whole circle of her acquaintance there was not one man or woman in whom she felt she could place confidence and depend on as a friend. It is generally the way in this world when we require assistance in the time of need.

We look round for those who have eaten our bread and borrowed our influence or our money, and find them slinking away in dark corners lest they should be asked to return the favours they have so liberally received.

Look at the woman who has kept a generous silence respecting the evil she could not choose but see, who has thrown a cloak over her sister's shame, and stood up

boldly in defence of the absent, who could not defend themselves, although she knew them to be guilty! Where are her friends in the day when the society to which she throws down the gauntlet ostracises her for an honest sin? Where are the wives whose lives are one long lie, who eat their husband's bread and smile in his face whilst they dishonour him with his dearest friend? Where are the women whose lives are known to everyone except the deluded fool who pays their milliner's bills? Where the mothers who can unerringly pick out from amongst their little flock the children who have no claim upon their husband's name, and yet to provide for whom he may have to toil until his hair is grey?

There are dozens of such women—undeserving of the name—who mix in the best society in London, and are shaken hands with by the highest there, and are not so worthy of admittance to the company of the virtuous and discreet as the unfortunate



creatures who wear out the pavements for their daily bread. But if such are asked after the welfare of their former friend—now fallen out of their exclusive circle—they will raise their painted eyebrows and shrug their whitened shoulders, and tell you that “it is really very dreadful, and they have felt it more than they can say, but even if they wished it themselves, their husbands are so particular they would not *allow* them to know Mrs. So-and-So any longer, for, you see, one must draw the line somewhere.” And so they slip away, leaning on the arm of the last favoured cavalier, and are lost in the crowd of false faces, false lives—and false hearts.

Oh, women of London, with your loveless marriages, your heartless intrigues, your promiscuous families, and your false friendships, if the grand parade of the Last Day is to be drawn up in anything like the order in which we have been taught to believe, there will be a heavy muster of you on the

left-hand side. Your husbands will rise up in judgment against this assertion and condemn it, but they are the last persons to know anything of the matter. The men of the world would confess it to be true, and your doctors and your priests endorse it every day.

The so-called friendship of an ill-regulated and ill-educated mind—such as most women possess—is not worth the keeping, but it reflects no less discredit on those who have not the courage to be true either to themselves or to others.

Alda felt this to its fullest extent as she mentally reviewed the women whom she had been used to call her friends. There were plenty of elderly ones amongst them—experienced matrons and mothers of large families—but there was not one whom she considered at the same time sympathetic and trustworthy, above all, who had a head fit to advise and counsel her, and a judgment strong enough on which to lean.

Mrs. Elliot was the only one of her acquaintance in whom she had ever placed the slightest confidence, and in this emergency Alda distrusted even her. She was very kind, it is true, but she was not very prudent, and this was too serious a case to trust to the rotten reed of female discretion. Yet to someone she must go in her great strait, and she felt that she would eventually fix upon Nellie Elliot, whose warm heart she was certain she could always enlist upon her side.

For, as Alda pondered over ways and means, one fixed plan had grown up in her mind, and she knew that she must follow it until it should be accomplished; and that plan was to go to Italy and ascertain for herself what steps had really been taken with respect to the murder of Claude de Beriot, and what the public opinion had been regarding it. Had she known Paul's address in London, she would have flown straight to him and told him the whole history, and en-

treated him to assist her in clearing her name and avenging his brother's death. But it was futile to search for Paul, and she remembered that he had told her that on that very day he should return to Florence, and there Alda resolved to follow him.

But the expedition must be kept a secret from all but Nellie Elliot. That was the most difficult part of the matter, yet Alda did not despair of accomplishing it, for after what Lord Sidney had said to her the day before, she would have an excellent excuse for desiring to dispense with his society for a short time; and should he presume to object, she had but to threaten him with exposure to ensure his acquiescence.

She understood now—as it was impossible she should have done before—how urgent was his desire to prevent her telling her father of the false accusation he had brought against herself, lest in the turmoil that would ensue his own guilt should be made apparent.

She recognised the weapon she held in her hand, and resolved to use it.

The broad morning light was now streaming in at the windows, and Alda rang her bell and desired her maid to serve breakfast in her dressing-room. As soon as the hasty meal was concluded, she attired herself for walking, and left the house before Lord Sidney had risen from his uneasy couch, where—as he told his valet—he had suffered greatly from distressing dreams, and the valet recommended his lordship to try a couple of Dr. Alderton's digestive pills before he encountered the fatigues of the day. Meanwhile, Mrs. Elliot, who, arrayed in a bright blue *robe de chambre*, was sitting comfortably over her coffee and toast, was startled by a double knock at the door, and the sudden apparition of Lady Sidney Carleton, fully arrayed as if for conquest.

“My dearest Alda,” exclaimed the little widow, as she rose to receive her, “whoever would have dreamt of seeing you at this

hour? I thought it must be at least the tax-collector when I heard that thundering knock. And here am I, you see, still in *deshabille*, whilst you are dressed for the day. That's the advantage, my dear, of having no bothering man in the house. One can do exactly as one likes. But how wretchedly pale you look! Are you ill?"

Alda had resolved what to say in answer to her friend's questions as she came along, and she was therefore quite prepared to meet the first assault.

"I am both ill and wretched, Nellie," she answered. "I am a very unhappy girl, and I have come here this morning to ask you to be a true, good friend to me, as I really believe you have every desire to prove."

"Indeed I have, Alda. You can't think how I have felt for you since the day you reposed your confidence in me with respect to the past, and if there is anything I can do to help you, I will."

"I knew that was just what you would

say, Nellie, before I asked you. Well, now, I am going to tell you a great secret. I am in a regular fix, and I want to leave England for a few weeks without the knowledge of Lord Sidney, or my father or mother, or anybody, and I do not know of a soul who can help me to do so but yourself."

At this announcement, the little widow's eyes became double their usual size. She was not in the habit of believing worse of her neighbours than was absolutely necessary; still, she was a woman of the world, and she had heard a good deal of ill-natured scandal about Lady Sidney which she had always steadfastly denied. Yet why she should want to steal secretly away from London in the height of the season, unless there were a lover in the case, passed Mrs. Elliot's comprehension.

"My dearest girl," she said, after a pause, "of course, I will always do everything for you that I possibly can—but why need there be any mystery about it, Alda? You mustn't

mind my saying so, dear, but I *do* hope there isn't a man at the bottom of it."

"*A man!*" echoed Lady Sidney, contemptuously. "Do you suppose, Nellie, that if my going away had anything to do with a man that he wouldn't be able to manage his own affairs and mine without any help on your part? Are people in the habit of taking a female friend with them when they elope together? or do you think that if I were contemplating a third love affair I am still so inexperienced as to require a 'gooseberry picker?'"

And between excitement and her keen sense of the ludicrous, Alda went off in a fit of laughter and crying, and was very much disposed to become hysterical.

"I ought to have known you better, my dear," apologised Mrs. Elliot, "and especially after what you told me the other day about your feelings for your first husband. But one is really thrown in contact with such dreadful women in the world that one grows



to believe there is no good in anybody. But don't let my silly remark deter you from telling me what you wish."

"I will tell you all I can," replied Alda, as she dried her eyes. "I have had a serious quarrel with Lord Sidney, Nellie, and no power shall induce me to return to Portland Place again."

"Oh, dear—oh, dear, what a pity! These matrimonial differences furnish such opportunity for talk."

"Don't be afraid; there will be nothing vulgar about this affair. It will all take place very quietly, you will see, and we have lived so completely apart this season that people will be none the wiser. But my mind is quite made up on the subject."

"Why, dear, what has he done?"

"He has grossly deceived me, Nellie. He induced me to marry him on the supposition that he had taken a journey to Italy solely to find out and punish my dear Claude's murderer. It was on that condition he was

to claim my hand. He came back and pretended that he had done all that was possible in the matter, that the assassin was found, and the law satisfied, and he had himself erected a handsome monument to my first husband's memory. And now I have every reason to believe that it is untrue, and that—that the man who made me the most wretched woman on the face of the earth is still at large, whilst Claude's blood cries from the ground for vengeance."

"How did you find it out, Alda?"

"I cannot tell you, but I know it to be the case, and Lord Sidney has even been mean enough to taunt me with the fact that he bribed the judicial authorities to discontinue their search, and to hush the matter up."

"And you have quarrelled on these grounds?" inquired Mrs. Elliot.

"I am determined on two things," replied Alda, ignoring the question. "The first is, that I shall go to Florence, and personally institute inquiries as to what steps were taken

to arrest the murderer of my husband. The second, that if I ever return to Lord Sidney Carleton's roof, it will not be until justice and I are fully satisfied on that point."

"But why do you not ask him to accompany and aid you, Alda? Surely he could not refuse?"

Lady Sidney gave a gesture of impatience.

"Once for all, Nellie, it is impossible. I loathe the very sight of the man who won me by a lie, and I will not see him again until I have had time to decide upon my future actions. If you will not help me in this emergency, say so at once, and I will risk the search by myself."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to leave London with me for a few weeks, and to accompany me to Florence. I can easily make my health an excuse to my parents for requiring change, and I have a hold over Lord Sidney that will prevent his raising any objection to the scheme."

" Will not people think it very strange of us to run off before the close of the season ?"

" Oh, what does it *signify* what they think ?" exclaimed Alda, warmly. " A set of false-tongued, self-seeking men and women, who only keep up our acquaintance for what we can give them, and never say the same thing behind our backs that they do to our faces."

" You are right there, my dear," replied Mrs. Elliot, " and I really don't think we shall lose much, for all the best families are beginning to move. By the way, it is curious you should have come here with your request to-day, for my doctor, who is a dear creature, but an awful old fidget, was begging me only yesterday to get out of town as soon as possible. I have suffered so much from nervous headaches lately, and he says nothing will cure them but change of air."

" Then let us be off to-morrow," cried Alda, eagerly, " and if you fancy the sea will do you

more good than the warm temperature of Italy, I could leave you at any place you decided upon, and travel south by myself. Dear Nellie, do let us start to-morrow !”

“You enthusiastic creature, how can we possibly make our arrangements by that time ? And what will Mr. and Mrs. Capel think of your running off so suddenly ?”

“I can manage my affairs, if you will manage yours. But you will have to keep me here, dear Nellie ; for nothing will induce me to return to Portland Place.”

The colloquy ended by Mrs. Elliot agreeing to invite Lady Sidney Carleton to accompany her for a few weeks to the seaside, and Alda wrote to her maid, Rosa, desiring her to come to Kensington Gardens Square to receive her orders with regard to her preparations for travelling.

She sent a note also to her husband, in which she informed him that she had accepted her friend’s invitation, and that after what had passed between them the day before, she

desired that he would not subject her to the pain of seeing him again before she left London.

The note was very brief, but it bore decision in every word, and the wretched man who received it did not dare to raise any objection to its contents, for in it Alda further informed him that she should plead failing health and the doctor's advice to her parents as a reason for quitting town, and she advised him to tell the same story, since, she added, significantly, she had no intention of letting them know the truth unless he compelled her to do so.

Having despatched these two letters, Alda paid a flying visit to Berkeley Square, where she played her part to perfection.

"How surprised you will be, papa, dear!" she exclaimed, as she embraced her father, "to hear that I have only just run in to bid mamma and you good-bye before I go off to the seaside with Mrs. Elliot."

"To the seaside already, and with the

little widow! What a sudden determination! I suppose Sid will accompany you?"

"Indeed, he does not, papa! You could hardly expect Nellie to burden herself with an old gentleman and a valet. Besides, Lord Sidney would not care for the kind of life we intend to lead. We are going to racket about dreadfully."

"Ah, at Biarritz, I suppose, or some of those dissipated places. Well, you are a nice pair to go flying over the Continent by yourselves! And what a fuss a certain young lady made the other day when her husband wanted to take her out of town before the season was over."

"Yes; down to Mabyn Fields—that would have been lively. You must allow, papa, that there is a slight difference between vegetating in the country with Lord Sidney and travelling about with my dear Nellie Elliot!"

"Well, well, we will look after poor Sid

in your absence. How long shall you be away?"

"Only a few weeks, and he will be at Mabyn Fields with mamma, I suppose, when I return. It is really a good thing I am going. I begin to feel dreadfully used up."

"Ah, the salt water will soon revive you! When do you start?"

"To-morrow morning, so I shall not see you again!"

"Well, good-bye, my dear, and take care of yourself. I shall expect to see you come back blooming like a rose, as you used to do down at Mabyn Fields!"

And so the careless, worldly parents parted with their child without a single question as to her motives or intentions in running off on a wild-goose chase with her not over-steady little friend, Nellie Elliot.

Having once decided to leave England, and set her thoughts in the direction of Italy, Alda became so feverishly impatient to be off,



that Mrs. Elliot found the best thing would be to let her have her own way.

Not a line came back from Portland Place in answer to the note she had sent Lord Sidney Carleton ; but Rosa, who guessed most of her mistress's secrets, arrived in Kensington Gardens Square with a formidable array of boxes, and a smiling face, to inform Alda that his lordship trusted she intended to take her maid with her on her travels, which was the only means through which he signified his acquiescence in his wife's determination.

Mrs. Elliot was very glad when it came to the point that she had acceded to Alda's proposal. She was well-nigh sick and tired of the season's gaieties, and enjoyed the fresh air and summer scenery that met their eyes as soon as they were clear of London.

The little widow had never visited Florence, and since her friend was bound there, she thought she could not do better than accompany her the whole way. And to

Alda, who, now that she had actually started on her quest, was puzzled to think how she should proceed on reaching her destination, the promise of Nellie's companionship and support throughout the journey was very consolatory.

It was a trying journey to our heroine. Twice she had traversed it before—once when she was in the flush of hope and love, with her fair young married life opening out before her, and Claude by her side, and again as she returned, crushed and drooping, with the uninteresting figure of Lord Sidney Carleton sitting opposite to her, and the whole landscape dim and blurred, as seen through the medium of her tear-swollen eyes.

Many a time, as they hurried onwards, did Mrs. Elliot detect Alda giving way to emotion as the sight of some familiar object—a wayside inn, at which she and Claude had taken refreshment; a cathedral which they had visited together; a romantic scene which he had hastily transferred to his

sketch-book—came in sight, and upset the equanimity which time and absence had seemed to teach her.

Many a time, as Mrs. Elliot saw how the foreign sights and sounds affected her friend, did she wonder if she had been wise in acceding to a request which appeared to afford so much more pain than pleasure, and she was thankful when the journey was accomplished, and they were safely lodged in the hotel at Florence.

The lovely summer weather was in its prime, and as soon as the travellers had refreshed themselves, and were somewhat rested from the fatigues of the journey, the widow was impatient to order a carriage and drive out amongst the many novelties that met her view. The flower-girls in their picturesque costumes, with their baskets laden with roses, lilies, and jasmine; the barefooted Carmelites treading the pavements two by two; the solemn bells that tolled from the various churches, now lighted for

evening prayer; the setting sun that shone over the Arno, and tinted the faces and dresses of the passers-by with a violet and golden glow—all these things fired her curiosity, and she entreated Alda to sally forth and introduce her to them. But Lady Sidney pleaded fatigue, or rather restlessness, as an excuse for non-compliance, and begged Mrs. Elliot to go out alone, or in company with Rosa.

"I can't tell you how I feel, Nellie, now that I am close to the spot where I was so happy and so miserable. If I only knew where my dear love was buried I would go to the cemetery and visit his grave. But for that I must wait until I see Paul. But my Claude seems to me to be everywhere. I should not be in the least degree surprised if the door were to open this very instant to let him in."

"Oh, Alda, do not give way to such foolish fancies, or you will make me sorry that I ever came here. You know that he

is gone, darling, and you will not see him in this world again. Pray try and compose yourself, or I shall think you are going to be ill."

"Don't be afraid of that, Nellie. I am as well as ever I was in my life; only I feel restless until the business for which I came here is put in train. I wonder if Paul has yet returned to the Villa Candesi!"

"I think it is very probable he has done so, if, as you surmise, he started the same day as we did. Our two days' rest in Paris will have given him the advantage over us. We will send a message to-morrow to inquire. Meanwhile, you will try to compose yourself and be patient, will you not, dear?"

"Yes, yes, if you will take your drive with Rosa and leave me alone. It is *thought* that is killing me, Nellie. Give me time to wrestle with it, and I shall come out victorious."

Mrs. Elliot considered it best to indulge

her whim, so she left Alda in the hotel, and went for a long, delicious drive over the Campagna, with the maid for a companion only.

They talked much of Lady Sidney as they did so—of her amiability and high courage, and their mutual hope that the change she was undergoing might do her good. They returned to the hotel about ten o'clock, and not finding Alda in the sitting-room, Mrs. Elliot sent Rosa up to her bedroom to ask if she would take any further refreshment before retiring for the night.

In a few minutes the maid returned with a scared expression of countenance. Lady Sidney was not in the sleeping-chamber, nor anywhere in the hotel. What did Mrs. Elliot think could have become of her ?

"She is taking a little stroll, I suppose," replied that lady, confidently. "She knows the town, and is not afraid to venture out alone. She is sure to return in a short time."

But as the hours went on and nothing was heard of Alda, Mrs. Elliot herself began to feel a little alarmed. Her knowledge of Italy was founded on tales of banditti and midnight assassins, and under any circumstances it is hardly safe or proper for a young and beautiful woman to wander about the streets of a strange city in the dark and alone. Had it not been so late, Mrs. Elliot would have ordered the carriage out again to take her to the Villa Candesi to make inquiries after her friend ; but the villa was a league away, so the proprietor of the hotel informed her, and the road was so lonely that he did not care to send his postilions there at such an hour. Madame had better retire to rest and await the return of the lady in the morning.

But "madame" had not the faculty of making herself comfortable whilst her friends were in possible danger, and, notwithstanding their fatigue, she and Rosa sat up together throughout the long hours of the ensuing

night, lest Alda might have been mysteriously delayed on her solitary ramble, and return to the hotel when everyone had gone to bed.

But though they watched and waited, and made each other miserable with all sorts of awful conjectures as to the reason of her absence, it was all in vain. The morning broke, and she had not appeared.





## CHAPTER IX.

“SHE SAW A SHADOWY FIGURE SLOWLY  
ADVANCE.”

MEANWHILE Alda was a league from Florence. As soon as Mrs. Elliot and Rosa had left her to take their drive on the Campagna, a great restlessness took possession of the girl. The four walls of the spacious room which she occupied seemed to close in about her as though they were a prison. She felt as if she should stifle, even whilst breathing the fresh evening breeze that blew freely through the open windows of the apartment.

She fancied that she heard Claude's voice in every murmur from the street ; each foot-

step that fell upon the pavement sounded like his familiar tread.

At last she could bear the agony of the remembrance no longer. If she could but see his grave, she thought—if she could look at the sacred spot beneath which the body of her darling lay, pulseless, loveless for evermore, but yet, even in death, her very own; and if she might water the monument that covered his remains with her regretful tears, Alda believed she would be better able to realise the truth that he was gone, and that it was in vain her poor foolish heart beat with excitement and expectation at every fresh sound that fell upon her ear. She knew her way to the cemetery where most of the foreigners who died in Florence were buried, for she had visited it with Claude himself when he first brought her to the city.

So, hastily assuming her dark travelling costume, she stole through the corridors of the hotel and reached the outside world

without observation. There she sprung into a vehicle plying for hire, and desired the driver to take her to the cemetery. It was the hour when trade and labour were suspended for the night, and the burial-ground was crowded with little groups of mourning friends walking sadly up and down between the line of graves. Alda stopped at the iron gates to fill her hands with Parma violets and tall white lilies and orange-blossoms, such as her young husband had loved so much during his lifetime, and then she found the man who attended to the graves, and asked him to point out to her the spot where Claude de Beriot lay. But he was very old and deaf, and slow of understanding. He shook his head at the oft-repeated question, and declared that it must be a mistake on the signora's part, for he remembered no such name as De Beriot being on the cemetery books. Stay, though; an old lady of that name was certainly buried there three months ago. Perhaps that was the

person whose grave the signora had come to visit.

Alda denied the imputation vehemently. She had no intention of strewing her lilies and violets over the remains of her mother-in-law. Surely the old cemetery keeper must remember! It was the grave of a young man she wished to see—an artist who used to live at the Villa Candesi—and a beautiful monument had been raised to his memory by an English nobleman.

But to all her adjurations she received only a shake of the head. It might have been so—doubtless it was—but two years was a long time to look back upon, and when funerals took place in the cemetery almost every day. Had not the signora better walk round and try to find the grave for herself? There were many handsome monuments erected there. Doubtless that of her friend was amongst them.

Finding she could extract no further information from the decrepit old creature,

Alda took his advice, but her search was futile. There were several conspicuous monuments in the churchyard, but on none of them could she find the inscription she looked for. She walked about till she was sick and tired, and felt inclined to sit down and cry, as if she had expected to see Claude himself there and been disappointed.

What Lord Sidney had told her about erecting a gravestone to his memory was evidently untrue—she must have seen a memorial had it been there. Doubtless her darling lay under one of the many mounds by which she was surrounded, and if she could only have guessed on which to lay her flowers, the poor child felt as if she should have been comforted. But that was impossible, and she must wait for the information until she had seen Paul. Disappointed in her search for Claude's grave, Alda's thoughts turned yearningly towards the Villa Candesi.

Why should she not visit it that evening? she said to herself, as she watched the pale

yellow moon rising amidst the violet clouds of the scarcely dispersed sunset. She would not attempt to enter the villa. She would only drive out to it, and gaze on the dear old place where she had spent the happiest hours of her life. With her rash, impulsive nature, to dream of a possibility was to accomplish it, and the next minute she was walking rapidly back to the iron gates that enclosed the cemetery with the bouquets of flowers still in her hand.

As she traversed one of the narrow paths she encountered the figure of a woman, shabbily attired, and kneeling beside a newly made grave about two feet long, covered with clods of earth. The mourner's face was hidden from view; but as Alda passed by she heard her give vent to one or two gasping sobs.

The girl's sympathy was awakened by the sound. She did not speak, but walking quickly up to the tiny grave, she deposited on it her bunches of Parma violets, lilies,

and roses, until it bloomed like a little Garden of Eden.

The mother looked up, first at the flowers, then at the lovely donor, and uttered only one sentence in return—

“May the good God bless you!”

“Pray for me!” said Alda, softly. “I, too am very wretched.”

“*You!* Have you, then, lost a child?”

“No; but I have lost a friend who was dearer to me than my life. Tell me, did you ever speak hastily to your little child? Did you ever see its eyes flash with anger upon you?”

“How could that be, madame? My precious boy was but an infant.”

“Oh, then, thank God!” cried Alda, bursting into tears; “for you do not know what misery is.”

She ran hastily towards the cemetery gates as she spoke, and the poor mother, bending her face down amongst the sweet-scented blossoms that covered her baby’s grave, breathed a prayer for the kind heart that

had placed them there. The sight of a woman leaving the graveyard in tears was not unusual, and Alda found her way unmolested to the shelter of a *calèche*, the driver of which she bribed with the promise of double pay to take her out to the Villa Cadesi.

She fully intended then to be back at the hotel as soon as, if not sooner than, Mrs. Elliot, for she would only drive out to the old house, so she told herself, and look at the tangled garden and the broken steps, and statues, and all the other things of which she had thought so little once, but which now appeared to her like fragments from another world of love and happiness.

She was so absorbed in retrospection of the past, as she was carried over the long, straight road that divided Florence from the villa, that the sudden darkening of the atmosphere was the first warning she received that the *calèche* had entered the olive grove by which the garden was surrounded. Then a terror fell



upon Alda that she had not known before. In her anxiety to review the spot where Claude and she had lived together, it had escaped her memory that no vehicle could approach the villa without being seen by its inmates. Naturally the time of night would favour her on this occasion ; still, if the carriage left the shelter of the grove and emerged into the moonlight, it would be a very noticeable object, and should Paul have arrived from England he might come down to meet it. And if they encountered one another, and he used the same rough language to her that he had done in the Park, what should she do, alone and in his power, without protection or support ?

Alda felt, as she had often done before when acting upon impulse, that she had been far too rash and hasty, and she ought to have waited until she had communicated with Paul de Beriot by letter, and obtained his permission, since he was now master of it, to visit the Villa Cadesi. Still, she was there, and

she could not return all the way to Florence without one look at the dear old place. So she stopped the *calèche* and descended to the ground, ordering the driver to remain where he was until she came back again.

It was one of those clear, moonlight nights for which the South is famous, and Alda was startled to see the long shadow thrown by her lissom figure as she tripped over the narrow, winding path which led to the bottom of the villa grounds. How familiar the way seemed to her! She had only dwelt amongst these scenes for a few weeks, and yet each tree and bush seemed graven on her memory as though she had known them for years.

She was traversing now a short cut amongst the tangled grass which Paul had shown her in those bygone days, and which would take her straight, she knew, to the three flights of ruined steps which led from terrace to terrace until they reached the verandah where she used to sit with her head

upon Claude's bosom while he smoked his after-dinner cigarette.

That was the empty shrine at which the poor child had come to worship, but which she dared not approach too near. All was so profoundly still and silent about the villa, as she reached the broken wall that formed the boundary of the garden, that Alda almost hoped her brother-in-law had not yet arrived, and that she would be able to enter the grounds without discovery.

The chirp of the insects in the grass, and the low cooing of the wood pigeons in the surrounding groves, were the only sounds made patent to her ears. The air was heavy with dew and the fragrant odours of the orange blossoms and tuberoses, which quite overpowered in the night air the sweetness of the thyme-scented grass she crushed beneath her feet. Everything seemed dead and still—still as her dead love in his lonely and silent grave.

As she contemplated the desolate scene,

Alda's heart felt like lead in her bosom. If she could only gain the shelter of that orange tree, she thought, where he and she had so often sat together, and weep until the fountain of her tears was dry, she would find relief. Had Madame de Beriot been living, there is little doubt Alda never would have ventured so near the villa, even had she attempted to visit Italy at all ; but with her knowledge of her mother-in-law's death all real fear had vanished. What if Paul were at home, and did perceive her presence ? He could but say harsh things to her, and in this desolation she could compel him to listen in his turn. But whatever happened in consequence, she felt that she *must* press the turf which had so often borne the burthen of Claude's body, and gain a nearer view of the apartments they had shared together.

In another moment she had stepped lightly over the low wall, and, with an occasional nervous glance behind and on either side of her, was making her way to the leafy bower

formed by the luxuriant branches of the old orange tree. She gained it without the slightest interruption. She was within the shelter of its green walls, with their luscious burden of fruit and flowers, and had sunk upon the grass, and pressed her fresh young lips upon the spot where her lover had rested in their happy honeymoon. Then, after a few minutes spent in the outpouring of a grief which she believed to be incurable, Alda raised herself to a sitting posture, and gazed through tear-stained eyes upon the verandah which was so familiar in her dreams. The pale, cold moonlight was streaming in upon it, making its white pillars gleam like silver, and throwing the room beyond into the darkest shadow.

“Oh, my darling!” exclaimed the girl, as she fell upon her knees and held out her clasped hands in the direction of the villa, “if you could but come back to tell me you forgive me for the last sad scene that passed between us, I should die happy. If I only

knew that you could hear me—that in that home to which God has taken you, you have some remembrance left of your poor Alda—that you could see my tears and read my repentant heart, and send me some token to say that it is peace between us—oh, Claude, Claude—my husband—my own!—come down from heaven and tell me that you love me still!”

The tears were pouring down her cheeks, and her breast was heaving with her convulsive sobs, yet still Claude’s grieving widow kept her eyes fixed on the moonlit verandah, striving to pierce the darkness that lay behind it. And as if in answer to her prayer, she saw a shadowy figure slowly and silently advance from the gloom into the moonlight. For an instant Alda believed it to be Paul de Beriot, and her heart stood still with fear that he should have overheard her outspoken words.

But the next moment the figure again moved forward, and turned its pale face up

to the star-bespangled sky. And then the girl saw, with a freezing terror known only to those who gaze upon the dead, that the countenance, though strongly resembling it, was not that of her brother-in-law, *but of her dead husband, Claude de Beriot!*

Yes, there was no mistaking him. There were the classically chiselled features; the large, earnest eyes; the slight, tall figure; the small moustache; and the dark, waving hair of her lost love. He had come back then! He had heard her prayer! That agonized appeal had reached the ears of even the angels in heaven, and the Almighty had sent down Claude to comfort and reassure her.

She tried to form his name, but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth, and refused to utter it, so she knelt there, silent and motionless, with her hands stretched out as if to God.

Presently the figure turned towards her, and with the same slow, dignified motion

placed its foot upon the first stone of the flight of steps that led to the spreading tree beneath which she knelt. And then Alda knew that he was coming to her side, that in another moment she should stand face to face with the spirit of the dead—the dead who had died in anger with her—and love and grief and every other human feeling was swallowed up in the sense of supreme horror that overtook her.

She rose to her feet, every drop of blood in her body frozen with fear ; she staggered forward a few paces in the moonlight as if to meet the descending figure, and then her courage forsook her, and, with a piercing cry of "*Claude !*" that penetrated to each corner of the ruined villa, Alda fell forward on her face in a fainting fit.

When she recovered herself, it was to feel hands loosening her clothing and cold water sprinkled liberally on her face, whilst a cracked voice was invoking the Mother of



God and all the saints in Italian to come to her aid and help her to regain her consciousness.

“ Oh, what has happened ?” exclaimed Alda, as she pushed the water and the hands away impatiently, and tried to raise herself and look round her.

She was no longer on the grass under the tree ; she was lying on the marble floor of the verandah, where the moonlight was still playing bo-peep with the shadows and casting fantastic shapes in every corner. The sight of it brought back remembrance to Alda, and elicited a sudden scream.

“ Ah, yes, I know ! *He* was here ! I saw him. Who are you ?” she cried, turning to the person who was occupied in her recovery. “ Tell me, in heaven’s name, have you been playing any tricks upon me ?”

But, as she turned, she perceived that it was poor old Pietra, and threw herself into her arms, sobbing :

“ Oh, Pietra, Pietra, the sight has nearly

killed me! I never thought when I so longed and prayed that I should really see him. And he did not smile. Had he but smiled, I could have borne it more bravely. But to come to me with that frown upon his face. It was cruel of him, and after all the pain I have gone through. Tell me, Pietra, can the angels in heaven bear enmity against poor weak mortals for the sins they have so sorely repented, and must I go unforgiven until I meet him in another world?"

"Mother Mary!" exclaimed the old woman, in her own language, "I know not of what you talk, signora. We heard you scream, and we ran out and found you lying down there as if you were dead. And to think that this is the way you should come back to the old villa, after all that has passed since you were here. They said dreadful things of you, signora; terrible things, such as made one shudder to think of even, but *I* never believed them, carissima, and so I told madame to the very day she left us to be a

saint in heaven. I always said you were too good and fond of Signor Claudio to do as they said of you, and that you would come back some day to tell us the truth ; and now you have come, signorina, and everything will happen as I foretold it."

"Oh no, Pietra, how can that be," replied Alda, as she laid down her aching head upon the old servant's breast, "when they have all left me but Paul, and even he will not believe my word? Everything is over for me in this world, Pietra, and I wish that I was dead and at rest. But I have heard the cruel slander of which you speak. I knew that Madame de Beriot said that I struck the blow that killed my Claude. But it is a lie, Pietra—a foul and wicked lie. I never knew that he was hurt until I saw him lying dead at my feet, and God is my witness that I would have died ten thousand deaths to save him one."

At these words, a slight movement was apparent in the room beyond, and a long

shadow was cast over the verandah floor, but Alda was too weak and dizzy from her late fall to notice either.

“I have come to Florence now with the sole intention of urging the officers of justice to follow up their search for my husband’s murderer, and to punish the wretch as he deserves. Oh, Pietra, I loved him as my life!” continued the girl, as she turned her fair face up to meet the old woman’s gaze. “Do not think me capable of hurting a hair of his dear head.”

But the look she encountered from Pietra was one of mingled astonishment.

“You are talking in riddles to me, signora,” she replied. “I know madame believed that in your passion you struck the hasty blow that caused her son so much trouble; but how anyone can accuse your pretty hands of murder, when there was no murder, beats me altogether.”

“He died!” said Alda, in a voice of despair.

“He did not die, signora. Is it possible you have been misinformed?”

Such a startling announcement was too much for anyone to believe at a first hearing, and the girl only imagined that her Italian was at fault, and the old woman had failed to understand her meaning.

“I am not speaking of Paul, Pietra,” she answered, in a dreary voice. “I speak of his dead brother, Claude de Beriot.”

“Signora, signora, he is *not* dead!” said Pietra, vehemently. “Mother of God, who can have so wilfully deceived you? Signor Claudio is in the villa at this present moment.”

Alda sprung to her feet, scarcely knowing whether she was in or out of her senses.

“*Not dead!*” she kept on repeating; “*not dead!* But I saw him lying there stabbed to the heart. *Not dead!* My Claude *not dead!* God of Mercy, am I mad or am I not?”

But even as she spoke, the figure she had

seen from under the shelter of the orange bower, and believed to be a messenger from the other world, advanced from the shadow of the sitting-room and stood in the full light of the room before her bewildered eyes, and she saw for certain that it was flesh and blood—her own husband, Claude de Beriot, whom she had believed for years to be lying in his grave.

“No, Alda,” he said, sadly, “*not dead*, at least outwardly, but dead to everything that made joy, or light, or life for him in this miserable world since you deserted his arms for those of another man.”

She attempted to approach him, but her limbs refused to move; she tried to speak, but her dry lips touched each other without sound. She could only gaze and gaze upon him as if he had indeed returned—as she at first believed—from the other world, and stretch out her hands in a sort of dumb pantomime of prayer. Claude misconstrued the action.

“Yes,” he continued, in the same voice, “I forgive you for that and all the past. Do not be afraid of me. Alda, my heart’s darling! so dear to me still, even when encircled by that remembrance which must embitter all my life, I did not deserve your faith; I see that now. I led you wrong, and I had to bear the consequences. I have borne them silently, patiently, and without complaint. Child, why could you not have left me to my solitude and my regret? Why have you come back in your distracting beauty to revive the old memories I try so hard to lay? No other woman will ever fill your place, neither shall any happiness of yours be marred by my reproaches or complaints. Only—go back to the life of wealth and gaiety that you have chosen instead of that to which I dragged you down, and do not cross my path again, unless you wish to drive me mad, and make me end the existence you have rendered hateful to me.”

He sunk into a chair as he spoke and

buried his face in his hands ; and Alda, still not knowing if she were awake or asleep, was moved to creep towards him and kneel down humbly at his feet.

“ Claude, Claude,” she whispered, “ speak to me. Tell me if this is false or true. I have mourned you in your grave for two long years. Why was I never told of your recovery ?”

“ What was the use of telling you ? Was it not much better you should think me dead ? Had you not already left me for that other man, Lord Sidney Carleton ?—*curse him !*”

“ Yes,” cried the girl, impetuously springing to her feet, and assuming the appearance of a beautiful fury ; “ yes, I echo the prayer—ten thousand curses on him, now and ever more.”

“ What !” exclaimed Claude de Beriot, looking up. “ Is he not your husband ?”

“ No, no, no ; he is not, and he never shall be. Oh, Claude, listen to me ! On that



awful night when they showed me your body, dead, as I thought, beyond recall, and your mother flew at me and denounced me as your murderess, *that man* was the only creature who defended me against her wrath, and took me back to my English friends."

"And you *did* not stab me?" inquired Claude, in a dubious voice.

Alda looked him through and through.

"*I* stab you, Claude?" she said, mournfully. "*I*, who would have died for you. Can you ask the question?"

"I was attacked whilst sleeping," rejoined the young man, hurriedly. "I remember nothing that took place for months afterwards. When I recovered my mental strength after the fearful illness I passed through, it was broken to me that I was alone, that my wife, after having inflicted on me a wound which, unfortunately for my happiness, escaped the heart by dividing the ribs, had eloped with her wealthy lover, Sidney Carleton. At first I was mad enough

to dream of justice, and my one desire was to disgrace you in the sight of the world ; but my mother, who was anxious to save me from needless exposure, combated my design by assuring me that, if I pursued it, she should immediately appeal against my marriage with you, which, had she done within the twelvemonth, as I was then under twenty-five years of age, would have rendered it illegal. I was baffled, therefore, at every point, and had no alternative but to sit down under my misfortune and bear it as well as I was able."

"And your mother did not, therefore, appeal against our marriage?" exclaimed Alda.

"She did not. Where would have been the use of it?"

"And I am still your wife?" said the girl, exultantly.

But Claude shrank from the idea with horror.

"No, no!" he exclaimed; "not that, Alda.

You have been false to me in heart and deed. We are divorced for ever."

"I have *never* been false to you, even in thought," she replied. "I call God to witness that since the hour we parted I have never ceased to mourn your loss. Claude, be just to me and hear my story. I did not marry Lord Sidney Carleton for fifteen months after your supposed death, and not until he had made a journey to Italy on my behalf, and came back with the intelligence that your murderer had been found, and that he had erected a monument over your remains in the cemetery at Florence."

"Alda, how long was that after you left us?" demanded Claude, with suddenly aroused interest.

"It must have been about a month afterwards that Lord Sidney returned to Italy, and it was four months before he joined us again in England."

"God in heaven, is it possible that my own mother was the person to work my ruin?"

said Claude, in a low voice of pain. "Pietra," he continued, calling to the servant within. "Where is Paolo?"

"In the corridor, signor, waiting for your summons to join you."

"Send him to me at once."

It was evident when Paul approached that he had been informed of what had passed. He bowed to Alda, but took no further notice of her presence, going straight to his brother's side.

"Paul," said Claude, earnestly, "there has been some great error somewhere, and you must act a brother's part to me, and set it right if you can. When I was lying ill after that fatal business, can you remember whether that Englishman, Lord Sidney Carleton, visited our mother?"

"He visited her many times, Claude, and they held long and private conversations together."

"When I first became convalescent, was he still in Florence?"

“He was.”

“Why was I not informed of his presence?”

“I suppose our mother feared to excite you by the mention of his name.”

“He was fully aware, then, that I lived!”

“Oh, certainly! I have overheard him discuss with our mother the best means by which to keep the knowledge of your wife’s infidelity a secret from you, and I wondered, Claude, that even our mother, in her love for you, should deign to enter on such a subject with the very man who had brought the disgrace upon us. You may be sure I kept out of his way as much as possible.”

“Paul, Paul!” cried Alda, excitedly, “there has been no disgrace, except that of the vile plot that was hatched against me. From the moment I left Florence, I returned to the protection of my parents, and after fifteen months of mourning, believing fully that my first husband was dead, I consented, on their earnest entreaties, to become the wife

of Lord Sidney Carleton; but, as you may suppose, our natures have never been congenial, and latterly we have lived comparatively separate lives. Not a week ago, I discovered, by the action of his walking and talking in his sleep, the secret which brought me here. Claude, the hand which struck the blow against your life was that of Lord Sidney himself. He alone was your intended assassin, and Madame de Beriot and he must have contrived to hatch the plot by which *I* was to be deluded into a second marriage, and *you* into the idea that I had rendered myself unworthy of you. Oh, how fatally we have been duped!"

Claude was still bending down with his face in his hands.

The discovery of his mother's treachery seemed to have overwhelmed him with remorse and shame. But Paul was gazing at Alda with speaking eyes, filled with the admiration of old.

"And it was the discovery of Lord

Sidney's falsehood that brought you here?" he said. "With what intention, Alda?"

"To find out how much was true and how much false of the story he had told me, Paul, for though *I* felt convinced of his guilt, I had no proofs by which to convict him except his own unconscious actions. And now, how am I to proceed? Claude, thank God, is not dead, but Lord Sidney is no murderer."

"He has committed bigamy, though," interposed Paul, hotly.

"Were we to accuse him of it, he would deny having heard of Claude's recovery. We have no proofs that he knew of it, though—forgive me for saying so—I feel sure that the reason your mother did not appeal against Claude's marriage with me was that she might have a constant weapon to wield over Lord Sidney's head in case he turned traitor to their common cause!"

"I believe it also," said Paul, gloomily.

But Claude had sprung to his feet, his

handsome face no longer pale, but flushed with the renewal of hope and happiness.

“Alda,” he exclaimed, passionately, “our marriage was never appealed against; therefore that second ceremony was a mockery and a sham. Tell me, my heart, what are you in the sight of God and man?”

“Your wife, Claude,” she answered, with trembling lips; “yours and no other man’s, as I have ever been, believe me, in my soul.”

She tried to reach the shelter of his arms as she spoke, but he held her gently back.

“One word,” he said, as he gazed into her liquid eyes, upraised so longingly to his own. “I have suffered too much in our separation to risk another parting. Is this *for ever*, Alda? Are you going to leave the wealth and luxuries to which you have been accustomed behind you without a murmur, and come home to the arms of your husband, who has nothing but love to give you in exchange? Are you prepared to bear the scandal and the shame that are certain to be attached to your



action throughout life, although you are innocent of all blame in the matter? Are you coming to be my wife, and my lover, and my second self for the remainder of your existence, for, if not, sweetheart, hard as it is for my lips to say it, you had better go back to the life you have left, and try and forget that your first husband ever recovered from the wounds that craven gave him."

But she laid her lips upon the hand that tried to keep her from him, and Claude felt her hot tears fall upon it as she did so.

"Dearest of all," she answered, "there has not been one day, one hour, one moment since we parted that my heart has not cried to heaven against the injustice of my lot. Oh, if I could but make you understand how I have hated and despised the luxuries in which you could not share, you would forgive me for ever having partaken of them! Claude, Claude, take me back. I ask you for no greater happiness than to lose the remembrance of the last few bitter years in your

dear love. Oh, Claude, I am your wife ! I have the right to ask it. Open your arms, and let me come home."

She saw his arms fling backwards as she spoke, and with a cry of joy she sprang into them and was at rest.

Paul, with the tears on his cheeks in sympathy with their recovered happiness, crept away to the kitchen to impart the good news to Pietra ; and whilst Mrs. Elliot and Rosa, in the hotel at Florence, were making themselves miserable with all sorts of fears for Alda's safety, the reunited lovers were sitting in the moonlit verandah, recounting each detail they could remember of the past, and interrupting themselves every moment to thank God for the joy of the present, and to make fresh vows of unalterable fidelity for the future.



## CHAPTER X.

“HE WILL NEVER HAVE ANOTHER. HE IS DEAD!”

AT a very early hour on the following morning, Alda burst without ceremony into the private sitting-room that had been engaged for Nellie Elliot and herself at the hotel.

Her hair was in disorder, her dress looked as if she had been sitting up all night—as, indeed, was the case—her cheeks were blooming like red roses, and her eyes shining like twin stars. In fact, she presented altogether a most extraordinary appearance for a lady of fashion, and when she flung herself into Mrs. Elliot's arms, and without making any

apology, began to smother her with kisses, the little widow really thought she had taken leave of her senses, or was matriculating for honours in the last branch of study which her sex has taken up so vigorously—the science of dysomania.

“My dear Alda!” she exclaimed, and not without a certain amount of pique as she remembered her needless vigil, “I am very glad to see you back, but I think you might have a little more consideration. Where on earth have you been all night? Rosa and I have been frightened to death for your safety, and have not had a wink of sleep. We expected every minute to see you brought home on a stretcher.”

“Ah, well, I haven’t been brought home on a stretcher, you see!” cried Alda, with a wild excitement in voice and manner that puzzled her friend still further; “and I didn’t come home alone, either, for a young man brought me back. What do you think of that?”

“Alda, Alda, pray think of what you are

saying," replied Mrs. Elliot, who was really shocked at the girl's reckless way of speaking, "and let Rosa take your things into the next room, and try and give me some intelligible account of your doings."

"Poor dear Rosa!" exclaimed Alda, as the maid looked at her mistress with sympathetic eyes. "Have you been worrying about me, too? What a wretch I am! But I couldn't help it, really I couldn't. Isn't this a lovely place, Rosa? How would you like to live in it altogether? Were I to settle here, would you leave England and come and be my maid and companion still?"

"I would go all over the world with you, my lady."

"Don't call me by that name, Rosa! I'm not 'my lady.' I never will be! Take my things away, there's a dear girl, and bring me oceans of coffee. I feel as if I could drink the sea dry."

"My darling Alda," said Mrs. Elliot, con-

cernedly, as the door closed upon the servant, "there is surely something wrong with you. You must have caught cold in the treacherous night air."

She was convinced that the girl had some illness coming upon her, so restless and excited were her words and movements, and so unnatural the strained pitch of her ringing laugh.

But Alda ridiculed the idea. She was longing to tell her friend of all that had befallen her since the previous evening, but she did not know how to begin.

"I was never so well in my life!" she exclaimed, as she paced up and down the room, her sunny hair hanging in confused masses over her shoulders. "Oh, Nellie, dear, if you only knew!"

"Tell me, then, darling, for you know that I am your truest friend. I can quite imagine how the sight of this place may have upset you, but you mustn't run any risk, or I shall get into a terrible scrape with your people at

home. Come, now, I guess you have been in the cemetery all night. Am I not right?"

"In the *cemetery!*" echoed Alda, laughing hysterically as she recalled the misery she had endured there. "No, I haven't. Indeed I haven't. I have been—— Oh, Nellie, it *will* come out!" she exclaimed, as she flung herself into Mrs. Elliot's arms. "I have been with my husband—Claude de Beriot."

At this announcement the little widow naturally thought that their fears were correct, and the poor girl was wandering in her mind.

"Alda," she said, gravely, "you are indeed ill. Let me put you to bed, and send for a doctor!"

But Alda repeated her assertion again and again, and in another ten minutes Mrs. Elliot was put in possession of all the facts of the case, and knew that Lord Sidney Carleton did not possess a wife, and it was Madame de

Beriot who was clasped in her arms and covering her face with kisses and happy tears.

"And, Nellie, he is here. He brought me into Florence this morning as soon as it was light, and I told him to join us at the hotel in half an hour. And, oh, wish me joy, dear—wish me joy! for I feel as if I should die of so much happiness. My Claude, whom I believed to be dead, given me from the grave again, dearer and more loving than ever! Am I alive myself, or shall I wake presently to find it has been all one dear, long delicious dream, and I have to go back to my miserable life of tears and of regret?"

She flung herself on her friend's breast with closed eyes, as if with the absence of her lover hope had again deserted her. But at the same moment a servant opened the door to announce Monsieur de Beriot, and Alda sprang up with an exclamation of delight, and proudly led her husband forward to present him to her friend.



Mrs. Elliot was instantly struck by the uncommon beauty and grace of the man who stood before her, but she was still so bewildered by the story which she had unexpectedly heard, that she could only gaze backwards and forwards from the husband to the wife with looks of unmitigated surprise.

“My dear friends,” she ejaculated, at last, “you must forgive me if the recital of your adventures has taken my breath away. We are not accustomed to such romances in prosaic England, and it takes a dull islander like myself some little time to comprehend them. But I know well what you have suffered, my poor Alda, and I can see that you look perfectly happy now, and so I congratulate you both with all my heart on the accident which has led to your reunion. But, oh dear—oh dear!” cried Mrs. Elliot, suddenly struck with the ludicrous side of the picture, “what are we to say to the good people at home? And what *will* Lady Selina Oldham and Mrs. Onyx Grey think

of your having two husbands alive at the same time?"

"My dear Nellie," replied Alda, with mock solemnity, "I have anticipated it all. Poor mamma will say, 'Dear, dear! what a pity it was when that objectionable young man was in his grave that he couldn't stay there!' and the blessed army of scandalmongers will affirm that I knew Claude was alive all the while, and should never have confessed otherwise had he not threatened to expose me to that dear, good man, Lord Sidney Carleton, whose only fault was that he had been weak enough to marry me."

"And Mr. Capel, Alda?"

"Poor dear papa! I will almost venture to say that he will be glad at heart, though he may not venture to say so openly. But he loves me, Nellie, and he knows that I have been a miserable woman ever since I lost my Claude."

"And whatever they may think or say, Mrs. Elliot," interposed Claude, in his

charming French accent, "my wife and I are resolved upon one point—that nothing in this world shall ever separate us again, even for a day."

"No, indeed," cried Alda. "And now, dear Nellie," she added, affectionately, as she slid her disengaged hand into that of Mrs. Elliot, "be his friend and mine, as you have ever been, and give us the best advice you can find in that sensible little head of yours. What shall we do?"

"I can see but one thing to do, Alda," replied Mrs. Elliot; "you must either write or return to your father at once. He is the very first person to inform of what has occurred."

"I will go to him," said Alda, decisively. "I and my husband will go straight to Berkeley Square and tell our own story. I will not trust to what that other man may say of me or Claude in our absence. Nellie, let us all start for England to-day."

A comical expression of dismay crossed the little widow's countenance.

"A nice dance you have led me," she said, deprecatingly. "You made me leave town in the height of the season with your '*Do let us go to-morrow, Nellie,*' and now that I have just accomplished this long journey in your behalf, and expected a little amusement for myself as a reward, you want me to turn round and go back to England again. You are the most unreasonable creature I ever came across."

"Oh, Nellie, dear, don't say that," returned Alda, coaxingly, as she hung about her friend's neck; "be good and come back with me now, and when we are settled in Italy—for we mean to live here for some part of each year—we will invite you to come and stay with us as long as ever you like, won't we, Claude?"

"Mrs. Elliot will always be most welcome to any hospitality it is in my power to afford her," said Claude, warmly, "if it were only

in return for all the goodness she has shown to my beloved wife during these cruel years of separation."

"Ah, well!" said Mrs. Elliot, with a mock sigh; "I suppose I shall have to yield to the pair of you, but I consider it a great fraud, all the same. And now, perhaps, Alda, you will be good enough to ring the bell and order breakfast, or your husband will have a very poor idea of your house-keeping or my hospitality. And if we are all to travel back to Paris by the evening train, I shall expect, at least, that Monsieur de Beriot and you will take me for a drive through Florence before we start, and point out the beauties of the city to me. And I should dearly like to have a peep at the old villa where all these wonderful events took place, before we return, into the bargain."

And so they sat down to breakfast together, the joy of the husband and wife, though great, being not untempered with anxiety, as they thought of the family meeting in

England, and the disturbance which their return would create there.

They travelled back to England as speedily as they could. There was no stoppage of a couple of days in Paris this time, for each member of the party felt that the sooner the task that loomed before them was completed the better.

Alda and Claude permitted themselves to be guided by Mrs. Elliot's advice in disclosing nothing of the connection that existed between them to anyone but herself. It was Lady Sidney Carleton whom she had taken from England, and she considered it a sort of duty to deliver Lady Sidney Carleton back into her parents' charge.

When the fact of Claude de Beriot's existence had been substantiated by the people whom it most concerned, the little widow felt it would be the father's part to place his daughter in her re-found husband's arms.

So they journeyed back as they came,

Alda and Nellie keeping close company, and Claude attending on them only in the light of a respectful friend. Even the lady's-maid was kept in ignorance of his identity, and though she thought it very strange that her mistress had made so short a stay in Florence, after having gone such a long way to reach it, she was compelled to keep her curiosity to herself until she should have an opportunity to air it in the servants' hall.

As they approached their destination, Alda became exceedingly nervous. The remembrance of what she had endured when she had first made known her love for Claude to her parents returned vividly upon her mind, and it required many a furtive pressure from her husband's hand, and a look of reassurance from his eyes, to support her failing courage. When they reached London, she entreated Mrs. Elliot not to desert her, but to accompany them to Berkeley Square. They had travelled by the mid-day boat, but had all the summer evening before them.

“Don’t let us separate till it is all over, Nellie,” she whispered. “Who knows that papa and mamma will believe my story? Perhaps they will say it is a lie trumped up to serve my own purposes, and insist upon sending me back to Portland Place, or turn me out in the streets to find a lodging where I can.”

“I don’t think that is probable, Alda; but should it prove to be so, there is always a certain house in Kensington Gardens Square open to receive you and your husband, remember that.”

“Oh, you *are* a good, true friend!” cried the girl, warmly. “If I can repay you, Nellie, for all this with the service of half my life, I will.”

“There are two people now to say ‘yes’ to that bargain, *cherie*,” returned Mrs. Elliot, laughing; “and I very much doubt if that gentleman who is gnawing his moustache on the other side of the deck at this present moment is one who would be favourably



inclined to give up a tithe of his privileges.”

“Poor dear Claude,” said Alda, as she regarded her husband’s handsome figure. “He is getting nervous, too, for my sake. But I will show him how bold I can be. I have suffered too much in his loss not to be able to endure a great deal for the happiness of regaining him.”

It had formed a subject of much discussion between the trio whether Claude de Beriot should accompany the ladies to Berkeley Square or not. Mrs. Elliot and Alda had thought it unadvisable, and suggested that he should remain at an hotel whilst they paved the way with Mr. and Mrs. Capel for the surprise of his appearance.

But the young man was resolute in his intention not to separate from Alda. If the party was to divide, he said, it was *his* business to go and claim his wife of Mr. Capel. He even threatened, should the women attempt to place any obstacle in his way, to

convey Madame de Beriot to an hotel, and not allow her to go to Berkeley Square at all. So they were obliged to yield and consent to his accompanying them.

“What a Blue Beard he seems directly he is crossed, my dear! I feel half afraid of him,” whispered Nellie Elliot to her friend. “I am sure I wonder he has been as tractable as he has. I believe he would walk you back to Italy at once if we thwarted his wishes in any way.”

“I believe he would,” said Alda, laughing in a reprehensible manner, and as if the idea were not half displeasing to her; “but, after all, Nell, we could hardly expect him to keep out of the way, like a boy who contemplates a whipping, whilst we do all the work. *He* has done nothing to be ashamed of, dear fellow! It is that other man who should slink away in a corner and hide his face.”

“And who will, my dear, depend upon it,” answered Mrs. Elliot.

When they arrived in London, the after-

noon was on the wane, and the evening shadows were commencing to envelop all things with a sort of misty indistinctness. Alda got hold of her friend's hand in the cab, and squeezed it tighter and tighter as their vehicle turned down one familiar street after another on its way to Berkeley Square.

The servant who answered their summons to the door stared as if he could hardly believe his senses when he recognised who were the occupants of the cab.

"Is papa in?" demanded Alda, breathlessly.

"No, my lady; Mr. Capel is not at home, but Mrs. Capel is in the drawing-room."

"Come upstairs with me, Nellie," said the girl, in a low voice of excitement. "Mamma will have a fit if the news is broken to her too suddenly; and, Claude, be good and stay down here until I come to you. Show this gentleman into the library, and take him wine or anything he may require," she added, imperiously, to the footman, who obeyed her

behest, wondering who it was that her ladyship addressed by his Christian name, and what the old lord would say when he found she had come home in company with such a handsome young fellow, and for whose comfort she appeared so anxious.

Notwithstanding his misgivings, however, the servant did not presume to exhibit the least appearance of them to Claude de Beriot.

There was a look of nobility and command about the young man which his artistic and somewhat careless garb was powerless to destroy, and as the two women pattered up the staircase on their way to the drawing-room, he followed the footman into the library, and took his seat there with an ease that betokened utter disregard of the grandeur of his surroundings.

As he was left alone with his newspaper and cigarettes, Claude de Beriot leaned back in his chair, watching with sleepy, dark blue eyes the rings of smoke he threw one after another into the air, and wondering how long

Alda would be over her explanations before she joined him again.

He looked at his watch. It was already past six o'clock, and the constant sound of wheels passing through the square betokened that the occupants of the various carriages in the Park were returning home to their dinner tables.

If Mr. Capel did not soon come back, so Claude de Beriot thought, he should sally forth to meet him at his Club, or go to Portland Place and encounter that double-dyed scoundrel, Lord Sidney Carleton.

He felt out of place, sitting there as a friend in the house of a man who might refuse to acknowledge him as such.

It was for that reason that he had rejected all the offers of refreshment the servant had made him. He declined to break bread in that establishment until the master of it invited him to do so.

But as he contemplated the idea of going forth to seek Mr. Capel, the sound of a latch-

key turning in the lock of the hall door was heard, and the next minute that gentleman, accompanied by Lord Sidney Carleton, stood in the hall.

They had returned from the Patrician Club together, for Mr. Capel had been so much struck by the broken-down appearance of his son-in-law that he had persuaded him to spend the term of Alda's absence in Berkeley Square.

They were talking of her as they entered the hall.

"It is *very* strange we should not have heard from her," observed Lord Sidney, fretfully. "It is now nearly ten days since she left England with Mrs. Elliot. I begin to wish I had not let her go."

"Nonsense, man," responded Mr. Capel, in a cheerful voice. "You mustn't judge of a girl by two old fellows like ourselves. Alda is only twenty-one, remember, when all's said and done, and as wild as a hawk. She'll write as soon as they've settled down a bit.

For my own part, I am not in the slightest degree uneasy on the subject."

The butler, who was busied in the dining-room, with the door open, and heard his master speak, appeared on the threshold as the gentlemen passed.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, "but Lady Sidney Carleton has *returned*."

"Returned!" exclaimed the husband and father, simultaneously. "When? Where?"

"About an hour since, my lord, with Mrs. Elliot. The ladies are upstairs, I believe, at the present moment, with Mrs. Capel."

"How very strange!" said his master. "Come into the library, Hanley, and tell us all about it."

He led the way into the room as he spoke, followed closely by Lord Sidney and the butler.

As soon as they entered it, the figure of a man sprang up from a chair at the further end of the apartment, and confronted them.

“Who is this?” demanded Mr. Capel, in a tone of surprise, addressing the butler.

But Claude de Beriot gave the servant no opportunity to reply. The appearance of Lord Sidney Carleton was to him as the taste of blood to the tiger.

“*Who am I?*” he exclaimed, loudly. “You had better ask that question of the man beside you, Mr. Capel. He knows my face well enough. Look at his own, and guess the reason for which I am here. Yes, Lord Sidney Carleton, you dared to marry my wife, knowing I was a living man; and I have returned to England to claim her, and denounce you on the charges of bigamy and attempted murder!”

“Good God!” exclaimed Mr. Capel, staggering backwards; “is this a madman who has gained admittance to us?”

“No, Mr. Capel,” replied Claude, firmly. “I *have been* mad—driven out of my senses by the wound inflicted on me by your so-called son-in-law, and the cowardly lying



trick by which he attempted to rob me of my wife ; but I am sane now that I have got my wife."

" *Your wife!* Of whom do you speak?" said Mr. Capel. "Who are you? What is your name?"

"My name is Claude de Beriot, and I claim your daughter Alda as my lawful wife," replied the young man, proudly. "You have been told by that scoundrel that I was dead! It was a lie, and Sidney Carleton, although he did his best to kill me, knew it to be a lie when he spoke the words. He had left me alive at that very time in Florence."

"Merciful heavens! is it possible this can be true?" exclaimed Mr. Capel. "Speak, Sidney. Say something to refute the fearful charge this stranger brings against you."

But all the answer Lord Sidney Carleton gave to his friend's appeal was conveyed by the sound of a heavy fall.

"Sir! sir!" cried the butler, in alarm.

"His lordship has been taken ill. He is in no condition to comply with your demand."

And he was, indeed, correct ; for the horror and surprise of coming so suddenly face to face with Claude de Beriot, combined with the knowledge of the utter futility of combating the aspersions cast upon his honour, or denying the young man's claim to the woman who bore his name, had hurried the unfortunate and guilty Sidney Carleton into another of those attacks which had already threatened to terminate his existence.

As he lay grovelling on the ground, every muscle in his body contorted by horrible spasmodic efforts to regain the breath his lungs refused to draw, with his eyes working as though in the utmost agony, and the bloody froth thrown over his face and hands, Claude de Beriot's natural impulse was to spurn with his foot the contemptible creature who had so nearly cursed the whole of his

life, as well as that of the girl he loved, for the sake of gratifying his own passions.

But the better feelings of pity and compassion prevailed, and he busied himself to help Mr. Capel and the servants to render what services they were able, in the hope of alleviating the suffering man.

A doctor was summoned to the spot as soon as it was possible, and introduced to the apartment where the patient lay.

The convulsions had by that time ceased, and Lord Sidney, with a face like marble, reclined in Mr. Capel's arms. His eyelids were closed, all motion had terminated in his limbs, and he seemed tranquil and composed, as though in sleep.

The doctor called for a candle, and holding the light full in his lordship's face, jerked the eyelid upward with his thumb, and let it fall again.

"Has he experienced several of these attacks?" he inquired of Mr. Capel.

"Yes, more, I believe, than I know of; at

least, that is the opinion of his medical adviser, Doctor Alderton."

"I thought as much," said the stranger, shortly. "Well, he will never have another. *He is dead!*"

After this, as may be supposed, very little of this story remains to be told.

A just revenge upon the living degenerates to a criminal cowardice when exercised upon the dead, and Claude de Beriot was not the man to revile those who could not defend themselves. Therefore, as soon as Mr. and Mrs. Capel had been put in full possession of all the facts of the case, the subject was dropped, and the dead man's sins were permitted to slumber with him in the grave. A meeting of council was called in the family as to the best mode of conduct to be pursued by Monsieur and Madame de Beriot, and it was universally decided that a couple of years' residence in Italy or elsewhere was indisputably necessary for Alda before she at-

tempted to re-enter London society in her new character.

The young couple therefore returned to the Villa Candesi as soon as might be, where, after a reasonable time had been allowed them in which to enjoy their second honeymoon, they were joined by Mr. and Mrs. Capel and Nellie Elliot, and spent the happiest autumn their lives had yet afforded them. Of course, Lady Selina Oldham, and Miss Toomey, and Mrs. Onyx Grey did not believe a word about Lord Sidney Carleton dying suddenly in a fit in his father-in-law's house, nor that his wife was present at the time, nor that there had been any mistake about the first husband's death.

"Depend upon it, my dear," said Lady Selina, solemnly, as they sat over their afternoon tea together, "*that* is the Frenchman of whom I told you last season. Of course, it is the Capels' object to hush up her ladyship's peccadilloes as much as possible; but everybody knows that things had come to

such a pass in that quarter, that poor dear Lord Sidney had no alternative but to threaten the man with punishment, and like all those nasty foreigners, I suppose, he stabbed him when he wasn't looking, or something of that sort ; anyway, it was a most mysterious death—no one will deny that.”

“ No, indeed, and I wonder Lord Sidney's family didn't take the matter up ; but I believe that girl had so much disgusted them all by her conduct, that they were quite strangers. And I heard that arrant little flirt, Mrs. Elliot, say the other day, that all the Carletons were mad, more or less, and that Lord Sidney's mother had died in a lunatic asylum.”

“ What was the object of her ill-nature ? I am sure *he* never did anything mad, poor dear ! The Capels are much more likely to be mad themselves. I understand the whole family has settled in Italy now, or some outlandish place, and that Mr. Capel is building up some old house for them there,

and is more infatuated with his daughter than ever."

"Well, really, the folly of some people seems to have no end!" cried Mrs. Onyx Grey. "I call it quite immoral to encourage a woman who has actually had *two* husbands living at the same time. It is disgusting even to think of, and all I can say is, that if Madame de Beriot expects *me* to call upon her when she returns to London, she is very much mistaken."

"Or *me* either," responded her friend, sourly, "for we *must* draw the line *somewhere*, dear Mrs. Onyx Grey. It is impossible to touch pitch and not be defiled."

And so Alda de Beriot, when she returns to her father's house, with her Claude and that little blossom of an Alda, who stands next in her affections to her husband, will have to go through the London season as best she may, with beauty, and love, and wealth to sustain her, since she must not

count upon the notice of Lady Selina Oldham or the virtuous Mrs. Onyx Grey.

Well for her if it be so! Well would it be for us all if we had the courage to cut off such demoralising acquaintances root and branch!

**THE END.**



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